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FIVE ONE ACT PLAYS



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FIVE ONE ACT PLAYS

THE DEAR DEPARTED—FANCY FREE
THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE—PHIPPS
THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

By

STANLEY HOUGHTON

(Author of "Hindle Wakes," etc)



LONDON

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THE DEAR DEPARTED

*"The Dear Departed" was
produced at the Gaiety Theatre,
Manchester, on November 2, 1908.
by Miss Horniman's Company.*

CHARACTERS

Mrs. SLATER }
Mrs. JORDAN } Sisters

HENRY SLATER }
BEN JORDAN } their Husbands

VICTORIA SLATER, a Girl of ten
ABEL MERRYWEATHER

The action takes place in a provincial town on a Saturday afternoon.



THE DEAR DEPARTED

(NOTE.—The terms "Left" and "Right" in the stage directions refer to the spectator's left and right, not the actor's.)

The scene is the sitting-room of a small house in a lower middle-class district of a provincial town. On the spectator's left is the window, with the blinds down. A sofa is in front of it. On his right is a fireplace with an armchair by it. In the middle of the wall facing the spectator is the door into the passage. To the left of the door a cheap, shabby chest of drawers, to the right a sideboard. In the middle of the room is the table, with chairs round it. Ornaments and a cheap American clock are on the mantelpiece, in the hearth a kettle. By the sideboard a pair of gaudy new carpet slippers. The table is partly laid for tea, and the necessaries for the meal are on the sideboard, as also are copies of an evening paper and of "Tit-Bits" and "Pearson's Weekly." Turning to the left through the door takes you to the front door; to the right, upstairs. In the passage a hat-stand is visible.

When the curtain rises MRS. SLATER is seen laying the table. She is a vigorous, plump, red-faced vulgar woman, prepared to do any amount of straight talking to get her own way. She is in black, but not in complete mourning. She listens a moment and then goes to the window, opens it and calls into the street.

MRS. SLATER (*sharply*). Victoria, Victoria ! D'ye hear ? Come in, will you ?

(MRS. SLATER *closes window and puts the blind straight and then returns to her work at the table.* VICTORIA, a precocious girl of ten, dressed in colours, enters.

MRS. S. I'm amazed at you, Victoria ; I really am. How you can be gallivanting about in the street with your grandfather lying dead and cold upstairs I don't know. Be off now, and change your dress before your Aunt Elizabeth and your Uncle Ben come. It would never do for them to find you in colours.

VICTORIA. What are they coming for ? They haven't been here for ages.

MRS. S. They're coming to talk over poor grandpa's affairs. Your father sent them a telegram as soon as we found he was dead. (*A noise is heard.*) Good gracious, that's never them. (MRS. SLATER *hurries to the door and opens it.*) No, thank goodness ! it's only your father.

(HENRY SLATER, a stooping, heavy man with a drooping moustache, enters. He is wearing a black tail coat, grey trousers, a black tie and a bowler hat. He carries a little paper parcel.)

HENRY. Not come yet, eh ?

MRS. S. You can see they haven't, can't you. Now, Victoria, be off upstairs and that quick. Put your white frock on with a black sash. (VICTORIA goes out.)

MRS. S. (*to HENRY*). I'm not satisfied, but it's the best we can do till our new black's ready, and Ben and Elizabeth will never have thought about mourning yet, so we'll outshine them there. (HENRY *sits in the armchair by the fire.*) Get your boots off, Henry ; Elizabeth's that prying she notices the least speck of dirt.

HENRY. I'm wondering if they'll come at all.

When you and Elizabeth quarrelled she said she'd never set foot in your house again.

MRS. S. She'll come fast enough after her share of what grandfather's left. You know how hard she can be when she likes. Where she gets it from I can't tell.

(MRS. SLATER unwraps the parcel HENRY has brought.
It contains sliced tongue, which she puts on a dish on the table.)

HENRY. I suppose it's in the family.

MRS. S. What do you mean by that, Henry Slater?

HENRY. I was referring to your father, not to you. Where are my slippers?

MRS. S. In the kitchen; but you want a new pair, those old ones are nearly worn out. (*Nearly breaking down.*) You don't seem to realize what it's costing me to bear up like I am doing. My heart's fit to break when I see the little trifles that belonged to grandfather lying around, and think he'll never use them again. (*Briskly.*) Here! you'd better wear these slippers of grandfather's now. It's lucky he'd just got a new pair.

HENRY. They'll be very small for me, my dear.

MRS. S. They'll stretch, won't they? I'm not going to have them wasted. (*She has finished laying the table.*) Henry, I've been thinking about that bureau of grandfather's that's in his bedroom. You know I always wanted to have it after he died.

HENRY. You must arrange with Elizabeth when you're dividing things up.

MRS. S. Elizabeth's that sharp she'll see I'm after it, and she'll drive a hard bargain over it. Eh, what it is to have a low money-grubbing spirit!

HENRY. Perhaps she's got her eye on the bureau as well.

MRS. S. She's never been here since grandfather

bought it. If it was only down here instead of in his room, she'd never guess it wasn't our own.

HENRY (*startled*). Amelia! (*He rises*.)

MRS. S. Henry, why shouldn't we bring that bureau down here now. We could do it before they come.

HENRY (*stupefied*). I wouldn't care to.

MRS. S. Don't look so daft. Why not?

HENRY. It doesn't seem delicate, somehow.

MRS. H. We could put that shabby old chest of drawers upstairs where the bureau is now. Elizabeth could have that and welcome. I've always wanted to get rid of it. (*She points to the drawers*.)

HENRY. Suppose they come when we're doing it.

MRS. S. I'll fasten the front door. Get your coat off, Henry; we'll change it.

(MRS. SLATER goes out to fasten the front door.

HENRY takes his coat off. MRS. SLATER reappears.)

MRS. S. I'll run up and move the chairs out of the way.

(VICTORIA appears, dressed according to her mother's instructions.)

VIC. Will you fasten my frock up the back, mother?

MRS. S. I'm busy; get your father to do it.

(MRS. SLATER hurries upstairs, and HENRY fastens the frock.)

VIC. What have you got your coat off for, father?

HENRY. Mother and me is going to bring grandfather's bureau down here.

VIC. (*after a moment's thought*). Are we pinching it before Aunt Elizabeth comes?

HENRY (*shocked*). No, my child. Grandpa gave it your mother before he died.

VIC. This morning?

HENRY. Yes.

VIC. Ah! He was drunk this morning.

HENRY. Hush; you mustn't ever say he was drunk, now.

(HENRY has fastened the frock, and MRS. SLATER appears carrying a handsome clock under her arm.)

MRS. S. I thought I'd fetch this down as well.
(She puts it on the mantelpiece.) Our clock's worth nothing and this always appealed to me.

VIC. That's grandpa's clock.

MRS. S. Chut! Be quiet! It's ours now. Come, Henry, lift your end. Victoria, don't breathe a word to your aunt about the clock and the bureau.

(They carry the chest of drawers through the doorway.)

VIC. (to herself). I thought we'd pinched them.

(After a short pause there is a sharp knock at the front door.)

MRS. S. (from upstairs). Victoria, if that's your aunt and uncle you're not to open the door.

(VICTORIA peeps through the window.)

VIC. Mother, it's them!

MRS. S. You're not to open the door till I come down. (Knocking repeated.) Let them knock away. (There is a heavy bumping noise.) Mind the wall, Henry.

(HENRY and MRS. SLATER, very hot and flushed, stagger in with a pretty old-fashioned bureau containing a locked desk. They put it where the chest of drawers was, and straighten the ornaments, etc. The knocking is repeated.)

MRS. S. That was a near thing. Open the door, Victoria. Now, Henry, get your coat on. (She helps him.)

HENRY. Did we knock much plaster off the wall?

MRS. S. Never mind the plaster. Do I look all right? (*Straightening her hair at the glass.*) Just watch Elizabeth's face when she sees we're all in half mourning. (*Throwing him "Tit-Bits."*) Take this and sit down. Try and look as if we'd been waiting for them.

(*HENRY sits in the armchair and MRS. SLATER left of table. They read ostentatiously. VICTORIA ushers in BEN and MRS. JORDAN. The latter is a stout, complacent woman with an impassive face and an irritating air of being always right. She is wearing a complete and deadly outfit of new mourning crowned by a great black hat with plumes. BEN is also in complete new mourning, with black gloves and a band round his hat. He is rather a jolly little man, accustomed to be humorous, but at present trying to adapt himself to the regrettable occasion. He has a bright, chirpy little voice. MRS. JORDAN sails into the room and solemnly goes straight to MRS. SLATER and kisses her. The men shake hands. MRS. JORDAN kisses HENRY. BEN kisses MRS. SLATER. Not a word is spoken. MRS. SLATER furtively inspects the new mourning.*)

MRS. JORDAN. Well, Amelia, and so he's "gone" at last.

MRS. S. Yes, he's gone. He was seventy-two a fortnight last Sunday.

(*She sniffs back a tear, MRS. JORDAN sits on the left of the table. MRS. SLATER on the right. HENRY in the armchair. BEN on the sofa with VICTORIA near him.*)

BEN (*chirpily*). Now, Amelia, you mustn't give way. We've all got to die some time or other. It might have been worse.

MRS. S. I don't see how.

BEN. It might have been one of us.

HENRY. It's taken you a long time to get here, Elizabeth.

MRS. J. Oh, I couldn't do it. I really couldn't do it.

MRS. S. (*suspiciously*). Couldn't do what?

MRS. J. I couldn't start without getting the mourning. (*Glancing at her sister.*)

MRS. S. We've ordered ours, you may be sure. (*Acidly.*) I never could fancy buying ready-made things.

MRS. J. No? For myself it's such a relief to get into the black. And now perhaps you'll tell us all about it. What did the doctor say?

MRS. S. Oh, he's not been near yet.

MRS. J. Not been near?

BEN (*in the same breath*). Didn't you send for him at once?

MRS. S. Of course I did. Do you take me for a fool? I sent Henry at once for Dr. Pringle, but he was out.

BEN. You should have gone for another. Eh, Eliza?

MRS. J. Oh, yes. It's a fatal mistake.

MRS. S. Pringle attended him when he was alive and Pringle shall attend him when he's dead. That's professional etiquette.

BEN. Well, you know your own business best, but—

MRS. J. Yes—it's a fatal mistake.

MRS. S. Don't talk so silly, Elizabeth. What good could a doctor have done?

MRS. J. Look at the many cases of persons being restored to life hours after they were thought to be "gone."

HENRY. That's when they've been drowned. Your father wasn't drowned, Elizabeth.

BEN (*humorously*). There wasn't much fear of that. If there was one thing he couldn't bear it was water,

(He laughs, but no one else does.)

MRS. J. (*pained*). Ben! (BEN is crushed at once.)

MRS. S. (*piqued*). I'm sure he washed regular enough.

MRS. J. If he did take a drop too much at times, we'll not dwell on that, now.

MRS. S. Father had been "merry" this morning. He went out soon after breakfast to pay his insurance.

BEN. My word, it's a good thing he did.

MRS. J. He always was thoughtful in that way. He was too honourable to have "gone" without paying his premium.

MRS. S. Well, he must have gone round to the Ring-o'-Bells afterwards, for he came in as merry as a sandboy. I says, "We're only waiting Henry to start dinner." "Dinner," he says, "I don't want no dinner, I'm going to bed!"

BEN (*shaking his head*). Ah! Dear, dear.

HENRY. And when I came in I found him undressed sure enough and snug in bed. (*He rises and stands on the hearthrug.*)

MRS. J. (*definitely*). Yes, he'd had a "warning." I'm sure of that. Did he know you?

HENRY. Yes. He spoke to me.

MRS. J. Did he say he'd had a "warning"?

HENRY. No. He said, "Henry, would you mind taking my boots off; I forgot before I got into bed."

MRS. J. He must have been wandering.

HENRY. No, he'd got 'em on all right.

MRS. S. And when we'd finished dinner I thought I'd take up a bit of something on a tray. He was lying there for all the world as if he was asleep, so I put the tray down on the bureau—(*correcting herself*) on the chest of drawers—and went to waken him. (*A pause.*) He was quite cold.

HENRY. Then I heard Amelia calling for me, and I ran upstairs.

MRS. S. Of course we could do nothing.

MRS. J. He was "gone"?

HENRY. There wasn't any doubt.

MRS. J. I always knew he'd go sudden in the end.

(*A pause, they wipe their eyes and sniff back tears.*)

MRS. S. (*rising briskly at length; in a businesslike tone*). Well, will you go up and look at him now, or shall we have tea?

MRS. J. What do you say, Ben?

BEN. I'm not particular.

MRS. J. (*surveying the table*). Well then, if the kettle's nearly ready we may as well have tea first.

(MRS. SLATER *puts the kettle on the fire and gets tea ready.*)

HENRY. One thing we may as well decide now; the announcement in the papers.

MRS. J. I was thinking of that. What would you put?

MRS. S. At the residence of his daughter, 235, Upper Cornbank Street, etc.

HENRY. You wouldn't care for a bit of poetry?

MRS. J. I like "Never Forgotten." It's refined.

HENRY. Yes, but it's rather soon for that.

BEN. You couldn't very well have forgot him the day after.

MRS. S. I always fancy "A loving husband, a kind father, and a faithful friend."

BEN (*doubtfully*). Do you think that's right?

HENRY. I don't think it matters whether it's right or not.

MRS. J. No, it's more for the look of the thing.

HENRY. I saw a verse in *The Evening News* yesterday. Proper poetry it was. It rhymed.

(He gets the paper and reads)

"Despised and forgotten by some you may be
But the spot that contains you is sacred to we."

MRS. J. That'll never do. You don't say "Sacred to we."

HENRY. It's in the paper.

MRS. S. You wouldn't say it if you were speaking properly, but it's different in poetry.

HENRY. Poetic license, you know.

MRS. J. No, that'll never do. We want a verse that says how much we loved him and refers to all his good qualities and says what a heavy loss we've had.

MRS. S. You want a whole poem. That'll cost a good lot.

MRS. J. Well, we'll think about it after tea, and then we'll look through his bits of things and make a list of them. There's all the furniture in his room.

HENRY. There's no jewellery or valuables of that sort.

MRS. J. Except his gold watch. He promised that to our Jimmy.

MRS. S. Promised your Jimmy! I never heard of that.

MRS. J. Oh, but he did, Amelia, when he was living with us. He was very fond of Jimmy.

MRS. S. Well. (*Amazed.*) I don't know!

BEN. Anyhow, there's his insurance money. Have you got the receipt for the premium he paid this morning?

MRS. S. I've not seen it.

(VICTORIA jumps up from the sofa and comes behind the table.)

VIC. Mother, I don't think grandpa went to pay his insurance this morning.

MRS. S. He went out.

VIC. Yes, but he didn't go into the town. He met old Mr. Tattersall down the street, and they went off past St. Philips's Church.

MRS. S. To the *Ring-o'-Bells*, I'll be bound.

BEN. The *Ring-o'-Bells*?

MRS. S. That public-house that John Shorrock's widow keeps. He is always hanging about there. Oh, if he hasn't paid it—

BEN. Do you think he hasn't paid it? Was it overdue?

MRS. S. I should think it was overdue.

MRS. J. Something tells me he's not paid it. I've a "warning," I know it; he's not paid it.

BEN. The drunken old beggar.

MRS. J. He's done it on purpose, just to annoy us.

MRS. S. After all I've done for him, having to put up with him in the house these three years. It's nothing short of swindling.

MRS. J. I had to put up with him for five years.

MRS. S. And you were trying to turn him over to us all the time.

HENRY. But we don't know for certain that he's not paid the premium.

MRS. J. I do. It's come over me all at once that he hasn't.

MRS. S. Victoria, run upstairs and fetch that bunch of keys that's on your grandpa's dressing table.

VIC. (*timidly*). In grandpa's room?

MRS. S. Yes.

VIC. I—I don't like to.

MRS. S. Don't talk so silly. There's no one can hurt you.

(VICTORIA goes out reluctantly.)

We'll see if he's locked the receipt up in the bureau.

. BEN. In where? In this thing? (*He rises and examines it.*)

MRS. J. (*also rising*). Where did you pick that up, Amelia? It's new since last I was here.

(They examine it closely.)

MRS. S. Oh—Henry picked it up one day.

MRS. J. I like it. It's artistic. Did you buy it at an auction?

HENRY. Eh? Where did I buy it, Amelia?

MRS. J. Yes, at an auction.

BEN (*disparagingly*). Oh, second-hand.

MRS. J. Don't show your ignorance, Ben. All artistic things are second-hand. Look at those old masters.

(VICTORIA *returns*, very scared. She closes the door after her.)

VIC. Mother! Mother!

MRS. S. What is it, child?

VIC. Grandpa's getting up.

BEN. What?

MRS. S. What do you say?

VIC. Grandpa's getting up.

MRS. J. The child's crazy.

MRS. S. Don't talk so silly. Don't you know your grandpa's dead?

VIC. No, no; he's getting up. I saw him.

(They are transfixed with amazement; BEN and MRS. JORDAN left of table; VICTORIA clings to MRS. SLATER, right of table; HENRY near fireplace.)

MRS. J. You'd better go up and see for yourself, Amelia.

MRS. S. Here—come with me, Henry.

(HENRY draws back terrified.)

BEN (*suddenly*). Hist! Listen.

(They look at the door. A slight chuckling is heard outside. The door opens, revealing an old man clad in a faded but gay dressing-gown. He is in his stocking feet. Although over seventy he is vigorous and well coloured; his bright, malicious eyes twinkle

under his heavy, reddish-grey eyebrows. He is obviously either grandfather ABEL MERRYWEATHER or else his ghost.)

ABEL. What's the matter with little Vicky ?
(He sees BEN and MRS. JORDAN.) Hello ! What brings you here ? How's yourself, Ben ?

(ABEL thrusts his hand at BEN, who skips back smartly and retreats with MRS. JORDAN to a safe distance below the sofa.)

MRS. S. (approaching ABEL gingerly). Grandfather, is that you ? (She pokes him with her hand to see if he is solid.)

ABEL. Of course it's me. Don't do that, 'Melia. What the devil do you mean by this tomfoolery ?

MRS. S. (to the others). He's not dead.

BEN. Doesn't seem like it.

ABEL (irritated by the whispering). You've kept away long enough, Lizzie ; and now you've come you don't seem over-pleased to see me.

MRS. J. You took us by surprise, father. Are you keeping quite well ?

ABEL (trying to catch the words). Eh ? What ?

MRS. J. Are you quite well ?

ABEL. Ay, I'm right enough but for a bit of a headache. I wouldn't mind betting that I'm not the first in this house to be carried to the cemetery. I always think Henry there looks none too healthy.

MRS. J. Well I never ! (ABEL crosses to the armchair and HENRY gets out of his way to the front of the table.)

ABEL. 'Melia, what the dickens did I do with my new slippers ?

MRS. S. (confused). Aren't they by the hearth, grandfather ?

ABEL. I don't see them. (Observing HENRY trying to remove the slippers.) Why, you've got 'em on, Henry.

MRS. S. (*promptly*). I told him to put them on to stretch them, they were that new and hard. Now, Henry.

(MRS. SLATER snatches the slippers from HENRY and gives them to ABEL, who puts them on and sits in armchair.)

MRS. J. (*to BEN*). Well, I don't call that delicate, stepping into a dead man's shoes in such haste.

(HENRY goes up to the window and pulls up the blind.) VICTORIA runs across to ABEL and sits on the floor at his feet.)

VIC. Oh, grandpa, I'm so glad you're not dead.

MRS. S. (*in a vindictive whisper*). Hold your tongue, Victoria.

ABEL. Eh? What's that? Who's gone dead?

MRS. S. (*loudly*). Victoria says she's sorry about your head.

ABEL. Ah, thank you, Vicky, but I'm feeling better.

MRS. S. (*to MRS. J.*) He's so fond of Victoria.

MRS. J. (*to MRS. S.*). Yes; he's fond of our Jimmy, too.

MRS. S. You'd better ask him if he promised your Jimmy his gold watch.

MRS. J. (*disconcerted*). I couldn't just now. I don't feel equal to it.

ABEL. Why, Ben, you're in mourning! And Lizzie too. And 'Melia, and Henry and little Vicky! Who's gone dead? It's some one in the family. (*He chuckles.*)

MRS. S. No one you know, father. A relation of Ben's.

ABEL. And what relation of Ben's?

MRS. S. His brother.

BEN (*to MRS. S.*) Dang it, I never had one.

ABEL. Dear, dear. And what was his name, Ben?

BEN (*at a loss*). Er—er. (*He crosses to front of table.*)

MRS. S. (*R. of table*) (*prompting*). Frederick.

MRS. J. (*L. of table*) (*prompting*). Albert.

BEN. Er—Fred—Alb—Iaac.

ABEL. Isaac? And where did your brother Isaac die?

BEN. In—er—in Australia.

ABEL. Dear, dear. He'd be older than you, eh?

BEN. Yes, five year.

ABEL. Ay, ay. Are you going to the funeral?

BEN. Oh, yes.

MRS. S. and MRS. J. No, no.

BEN. No, of course not. (*He retires to the left.*)

ABEL (*rising*). Well, I suppose you've only been waiting for me to begin tea. I'm feeling hungry.

MRS. S. (*taking up the kettle*). I'll make tea.

ABEL. Come along, now; sit you down and let's be jolly.

(ABEL sits at the head of the table, facing spectator. BEN and MRS. JORDAN on the left. VICTORIA brings a chair and sits byABEL. MRS. SLATER and HENRY sit on the right. Both the women are next toABEL.)

MRS. S. Henry, give grandpa some tongue.

ABEL. Thank you. I'll make a start. (*He helps himself to bread and butter.*)

(HENRY serves the tongue and MRS. SLATER pours out tea. OnlyABEL eats with any heartiness.)

BEN. Glad to see you've got an appetite, Mr. Merryweather, although you've not been so well.

ABEL. Nothing serious. I've been lying down for a bit.

MRS. S. Been to sleep, grandfather?

ABEL. No, I've not been to sleep.

MRS. S. and HENRY. Oh!

ABEL (*eating and drinking*). I can't exactly call

everything to mind, but I remember I was a bit dazed, like. I couldn't move an inch, hand or foot.

BEN. And could you see and hear, Mr. Merryweather?

ABEL. Yes, but I don't remember seeing anything particular. Mustard, Ben. (*BEN passes the mustard.*)

MRS. S. Of course not, grandfather. It was all your fancy. You must have been asleep.

ABEL (*snappishly*). I tell you I wasn't asleep, 'Melia. Damn it, I ought to know.

MRS. J. Didn't you see Henry or Amelia come into the room?

ABEL (*scratching his head*). Now let me think—

MRS. S. I wouldn't press him, Elizabeth. Don't press him.

HENRY. No. I wouldn't worry him.

ABEL (*suddenly recollecting*). Ay, begad! 'Melia and Henry, what the devil did you mean by shifting my bureau out of my bedroom?

(HENRY and MRS. SLATER are speechless.)

D'you hear me? Henry! 'Melia!

MRS. J. What bureau was that, father?

ABEL. Why, my bureau, the one I bought—

MRS. J. (*pointing to the bureau*). Was it that one, father?

ABEL. Ah, that's it. What's it doing here? Eh?

(*A pause. The clock on the mantelpiece strikes six. Every one looks at it.*)

Drat me if that isn't my clock, too. What the devil's been going on in this house?

(*A slight pause.*)

BEN. Well, I'll be hanged.

MRS. J. (*rising*). I'll tell you what's been going on in this house, father. Nothing short of robbery.

MRS. S. Be quiet, Elizabeth.

MRS. J. I'll not be quiet. Oh, I call it double-faced.

HENRY. Now, now, Elizabeth.

MRS. J. And you, too. Are you such a poor creature that you must do every dirty thing she tells you?

MRS. S. (*rising*). Remember where you are, Elizabeth.

HENRY (*rising*). Come, come. No quarrelling.

BEN (*rising*). My wife's every right to speak her own mind.

MRS. S. Then she can speak it outside, not here.

ABEL (*rising*). (*Thumping the table*.) Damn it all, will some one tell me what's been going on.

MRS. J. Yes, I will. I'll not see you robbed.

ABEL. Who's been robbing me?

MRS. J. Amelia and Henry. They've stolen your clock and bureau. (*Working herself up*.) They sneaked into your room like a thief in the night and stole them after you were dead.

HENRY and MRS. S. Hush! Quiet, Elizabeth!

MRS. J. I'll not be stopped. After you were dead, I say.

ABEL. After who was dead?

MRS. J. You.

ABEL. But I'm not dead.

MRS. J. No, but they thought you were.

(*A pause. Abel gazes round at them*.)

ABEL. Oho! So that's why you're all in black to-day. You thought I was dead. (*He chuckles*.) That was a big mistake. (*He sits and resumes his tea*.)

MRS. S. (*sobbing*). Grandfather.

ABEL. It didn't take you long to start dividing my things between you.

MRS. J. No, father; you mustn't think that,

Amelia was simply getting hold of them on her own account.

ABEL. You always were a keen one, Amelia. I suppose you thought the will wasn't fair.

HENRY. Did you make a will?

ABEL. Yes, it was locked up in the bureau.

MRS. J. And what was in it, father?

ABEL. That doesn't matter now. I'm thinking of destroying it and making another.

MRS. S. (*sobbing*). Grandfather, you'll not be hard on me.

ABEL. I'll trouble you for another cup of tea, 'Melia; two lumps and plenty of milk.

MRS. S. With pleasure, grandfather. (*She pours out the tea.*)

ABEL. I don't want to be hard on any one. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Since your mother died, I've lived part of the time with you, 'Melia, and part with you, Lizzie. Well, I shall make a new will, leaving all my bits of things to whoever I'm living with when I die. How does that strike you?

HENRY. It's a bit of a lottery, like.

MRS. J. And who do you intend to live with from now?

ABEL (*drinking his tea*). I'm just coming to that.

MRS. J. You know, father, it's quite time you came to live with us again. We'd make you very comfortable.

MRS. S. No, he's not been with us as long as he was with you.

MRS. J. I may be wrong, but I don't think father will fancy living on with you after what's happened to-day.

ABEL. So you'd like to have me again, Lizzie?

MRS. J. You know we're ready for you to make your home with us for as long as you please.

ABEL. What do you say to that, 'Melia?

MRS. S. All I can say is that Elizabeth's changed

her mind in the last two years. (*Rising.*) Grand-father, do you know what the quarrel between us was about?

MRS. J. Amelia, don't be a fool; sit down.

MRS. S. No, if I'm not to have him, you shan't either. We quarrelled because Elizabeth said she wouldn't take you off our hands at any price. She said she'd had enough of you to last a life-time, and we'd got to keep you.

ABEL. It seems to me that neither of you has any cause to feel proud about the way you've treated me.

MRS. S. If I've done anything wrong, I'm sure I'm sorry for it.

MRS. J. And I can't say more than that, too.

ABEL. It's a bit late to say it, now. You neither of you cared to put up with me.

MRS. S. and MRS. J. No, no, grandfather.

ABEL. Ay, you both say that because of what I've told you about leaving my money. Well, since you don't want me I'll go to some one that does.

BEN. Come, Mr. Merryweather, you've got to live with one of your daughters.

ABEL. I'll tell you what I've got to do. On Monday next I've got to do three things. I've got to go to the lawyer's and alter my will; and I've got to go to the insurance office and pay my premium; and I've got to go to St. Philips's Church and get married.

BEN and HENRY. What!

MRS. J. Get married!

MRS. S. He's out of his senses.

(*General consternation.*)

ABEL. I say I'm going to get married.

MRS. S. Who to?

ABEL. To Mrs. John Shorrocks who keeps the *Ring-o'-Bells*. We've had it fixed up a good while now, but I was keeping it for a pleasant surprise.

(*He rises.*) I felt I was a bit of a burden to you, so I found some one who'd think it a pleasure to look after me. We shall be very glad to see you at the ceremony. (*He gets to the door.*) Till Monday, then. Twelve o'clock at St. Philips's Church. (*Opening the door.*) It's a good thing you brought that bureau downstairs, 'Melia. It'll be handier to carry across to the *Ring-o'-Bells* on Monday.

(*He goes out.*)

(THE CURTAIN FALLS.)

FANCY FREE

*"Fancy Free" was produced
at the Tivoli Theatre, London,
on Monday, June 17, 1912.*

CHARACTERS

FANCY

ALFRED

ETHELBERT

DELIA

The Scene represents the writing-room of the *Hotel Cosmopolitan*, Babylon-on-Sea.

FANCY FREE

The writing-room of the Hotel Cosmopolitan is a tall, handsome apartment, exquisitely furnished. The great fireplace faces the spectator, with a lounge chair on each side. Near him, on his left, is a double writing-table containing two desks opposite one another. Chairs face each desk. Still further left is a settee against the wall. On his right a settee placed at right angles to the wall, a small low table, and a low padded armchair. There is another writing-table on the right of the fireplace, and a book-case on the left. The two entrances, each with double doors, are set diagonally across the two visible corners of the room, one right and one left.

The fire is burning, and the electric lights are on. It is a little after ten o'clock.

FANCY, in an evening gown, is sitting on the right hand of the double desk, trying to compose a letter. She is petite, dark and pretty. **ALFRED** comes in from the left in evening dress. He is tall, fair, clean-shaven and handsome.

FANCY (*looking up*). Well?

ALFRED. I find that the last post goes at midnight. It is now exactly a quarter-past ten.

FANCY. Then I have still an hour and three-quarters in which to finish the letter.

(ALFRED kneels on the chair on the other side of the double desk and watches FANCY.)

ALFRED. I am disappointed in you, Fancy. I knew that I should be disappointed in you some day, but I did not expect it to come so soon.

FANCY. My dear Alfred, pray do not forget that this is no ordinary letter.

ALFRED. It ought not to be so difficult to tell one's husband that one has run away from him.

FANCY. But I have had so little experience. I daresay I shall improve with practice.

ALFRED. How far have you got?

FANCY. I'll read it to you. "Darling Ethelbert—"

ALFRED. Stop! Ought you to call him darling now?

FANCY. Why not?

ALFRED. A sensitive mind might detect something inappropriate in the adjective.

FANCY. I always call him darling when I write to him. I feel sure he would feel hurt if I omitted to do so on this occasion. Besides, I am still very fond of him.

ALFRED. Perhaps you are right. We cannot too scrupulously avoid wounding him.

FANCY (*reading*). "DARLING Ethelbert,

" You will be interested to hear that since you went to Scotland on Thursday last I have decided to run away with Alfred. You cannot have forgotten the promises we made each other on our wedding-day. I am not referring to those we made publicly during the marriage ceremony, but to our private understanding that each should be entirely free and untrammelled provided that the other's health and comfort was not interfered with. You will understand, therefore, that in leaving you and going away with Alfred I am doing nothing that is contrary to our

agreement. You would have been entitled to complain only if I had insisted on bringing Alfred home with me."

FANCY. That's logic, isn't it ?

ALFRED. Yes. Feminine logic.

FANCY. That is all Ethelbert has any right to expect from me.

ALFRED. How do you proceed ?

FANCY. I don't. That is the difficulty.

ALFRED. At any rate, Fancy, you have made it clear to Ethelbert that you have left him. That is all that is essential. You have only to wind up now.

FANCY. How ? "Yours faithfully" ?

ALFRED. Why not "Yours formerly" ?

FANCY. But I am afraid that is too abrupt. Ethelbert is so sensitive. I should like to wind up with something kind.

ALFRED. Let me see. "You will be glad to hear that we are having an awfully jolly time here."

FANCY. I doubt whether Ethelbert would be glad to hear it.

ALFRED. Then something chatty or discursive. "The *Cosmopolitan* is an exceedingly nice hotel. It contains no fewer than 250 bedrooms, each elaborately furnished with all modern conveniences."

FANCY. Ethelbert will hardly care for such details. Besides, I do not consider that the *Cosmopolitan* is such a nice hotel.

ALFRED. It is an exceedingly expensive one. Let us endeavour to extract as much enjoyment out of it as possible.

FANCY. I am sure that I should have preferred the *Grand Rendevous*.

ALFRED. The *Grand Rendevous* is, if possible, still more expensive.

FANCY. What does that matter ?

ALFRED. To you, little or nothing. It is I who have to pay the bill.

FANCY. Alfred, you have the soul of a stockbroker.

ALFRED. Do not flatter me. I have sometimes hoped I had.

FANCY. If I had realized how useless you would be in an emergency, I doubt whether I should have run away with you.

ALFRED. My dear Fancy, I did not run away with you in order to conduct your correspondence. You should have advertised for a private secretary. I had hoped to be something more to you than that.

FANCY (*rising*). I shall go to my room. It is quite impossible for me to finish this letter here.

ALFRED. Why ?

FANCY. This room is far too crowded.

ALFRED. This is not a quarrel, I trust, Fancy.

FANCY. Certainly not. I hope I have too much tact to quarrel with you on the first day of our elopement.

(FANCY goes to the door with her letter.)

ALFRED. When may I expect to see you again ?

FANCY. The last post goes at midnight.

(FANCY goes out L. Hardly has she gone than ETHELBERT comes in R. He is a good-looking, dark man, in evening dress.)

ALFRED (*thunderstruck*). Ethelbert !

ETHELBERT. Alfred !

ALFRED. My dear fellow.

ETHELBERT. How are you, old chap ?

ALFRED. What brings you here ? I understood you were travelling on business.

ETHELBERT. So I am. Extremely private business.

ALFRED. How singular that we should meet !

ETHELBERT. Are you here on business too ?

ALFRED. Ei—yes. Extremely private business also.

ETHELBERT. Come. Let us sit down and talk.

(*He sits in the armchair R. of the fire.*)

ALFRED. With pleasure. But do not let us talk here.

ETHELBERT. Why not?

ALFRED. This is an exceedingly dull room.

ETHELBERT. It is a very charming room.

• ALFRED. But I assure you, I have been here quite half an hour, and nothing whatever has happened.

ETHELBERT. Then we can talk the more comfortably.

(ALFRED *sits down reluctantly.*)

ALFRED. Where were you going when you came in here?

ETHELBERT. I was looking for the American Bar.

ALFRED. Excellent! We will go and look for it together. (*He rises.*)

ETHELBERT. Presently. There is no hurry.
(ALFRED *sits down.*)

ALFRED (*yawning*). Do you know, Ethelbert, I feel I ought to be getting to bed.

ETHELBERT. Bed? Why, it is only half-past ten.

ALFRED. I promised my mother, before she died, that whenever practicable I would be in bed by half-past ten.

ETHELBERT. But I want to talk to you about Fancy.

ALFRED. About Fancy! Do you think you ought to talk to me about Fancy? The relations of a husband and wife should be sacred, surely.

ETHELBERT. I want to ask your advice, Alfred. I have begun to suspect that Fancy is growing tired of me.

ALFRED (*looking at his watch*). I must positively be in bed before ten o'clock—

ETHELBERT. Why does a woman grow tired of a man?

ALFRED. Because the last post goes at midnight.

ETHELBERT. No. Because she prefers somebody else.

ALFRED. (*interested*). Do you suspect that Fancy is in love with somebody else?

ETHELBERT. I do.

ALFRED. Who is he?

ETHELBERT. I have no idea. I wish I had.

ALFRED. Don't you think you will be much happier if you remain in ignorance?

ETHELBERT. Oh, I am not thinking of myself. I am thinking of him.

ALFRED. Indeed.

ETHELBERT. Yes. I should like to warn him.

ALFRED. To warn him?

ETHELBERT. I'm afraid she'll be running away with the poor fellow.

ALFRED (*uneasily*). Why do you call him a poor fellow?

ETHELBERT. Fancy is so terribly extravagant. She spends money like water, especially when it is not her own.

ALFRED (*unthinkingly*). Have *you* found that out, too?

ETHELBERT. Of course I've found it out, and so would you if you had been married to her as long as I have. Candidly, I'm afraid Fancy will ruin the poor fellow.

ALFRED. What has that to do with you?

ETHELBERT. I hope I am a humane person, Alfred. I would not willingly see my worst enemy reduced to the workhouse, and this poor fellow may be one of my friends. I should be intensely sorry if one of my friends ruined himself for the sake of my wife. I can assure you that she is not worth it. In my experience, very few women are.

ALFRED. Ethelbert, forgive me if I point out that

you are not looking at this affair in the proper way.

ETHELBERT. Indeed? In what way do you consider that I ought to look at it?

ALFRED. Do you mean to say that you are not indignant at the idea of another man eloping with your wife?

ETHELBERT. Not in the least.

ALFRED (*warmly*). Then you ought to be, that's all.

ETHELBERT. When I married Fancy we arranged to leave each other absolutely free. I am a gentleman, Alfred; you would not have me break my word.

ALFRED. But it is quite inconceivable! You are without any sense of moral responsibility. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.

ETHELBERT. I very often am. Aren't you?

ALFRED. Certainly not. I regulate my life, I am thankful to say, by a strict rule of conduct, which I observe as closely as possible. If I have lapses, so much the worse. They are regrettable, but not unnatural. At any rate, I have the immense consolation of knowing that my principles are not lax, but that I have merely failed to adhere to them for once in a way.

ETHELBERT. Believe me, Alfred, it is a mistake to have too many principles.

ALFRED. Why?

ETHELBERT. Because if you have too many it is quite impossible to stick to them all. I content myself with one only.

ALFRED. What is that?

ETHELBERT. Never be a hypocrite. It is an excellent maxim. It permits you to do whatever you please, provided you don't pretend you are not doing it. I advise you to adopt it and to drop all your other principles.

ALFRED. Do you insinuate that I am a hypocrite?

ETHELBERT. Not at all.

ALFRED. Then you are wrong. I am.

ETHELBERT. Really? You grow more interesting every day.

ALFRED. Please do not flatter me. I am conscious that I do not deserve it. Ethelbert, your deplorable views about morality have awakened my conscience. I must conceal the truth from you no longer. Besides, I think it is extremely probable that you would have found it out in any case very shortly.

ETHELBERT. What do you mean?

ALFRED. I knew, all the time, that Fancy was in love with another man.

ETHELBERT. How?

ALFRED. Because I am that other man.

ETHELBERT. You don't say so! Permit me to offer you my sincere condolences.

ALFRED. Thank you.

(They shake hands gravely.)

ETHELBERT. How fortunate that I should be able to warn you before it is too late!

ALFRED. Ethelbert, you must know all. It is too late. I have already run away with your wife.

ETHELBERT. Already! When did it happen?

ALFRED. This morning.

ETHELBERT. This morning? Then—

ALFRED. Yes. You are right. Fancy is actually in this hotel at the present moment.

ETHELBERT. Upon my soul, Alfred, this is most unfriendly of you.

ALFRED. Go on. I am conscious that I merit all your reproaches.

ETHELBERT. I call it grossly indequate to bring Fancy to the very hotel in which I am staying.

ALFRED. But, hang it all, we did not know that you were staying here. You don't suppose we chose it for that reason, do you? We thought you were in Scotland.

ETHELBERT. Ah, true. I did go to Scotland. I spoke without reflecting. I beg your pardon, Alfred.

ALFRED (*politely*). Not at all.

(*A pause.*)

ETHELBERT. Well, and how do you get on with Fancy ?

ALFRED. I hardly think I am justified in venturing upon an opinion upon such a slight acquaintance.

ETHELBERT. I wonder if I may presume to offer you some advice ?

ALFRED. By all means.

ETHELBERT. If you are going to succeed in managing Fancy, you will have to put your foot down at once.

ALFRED. Put my foot down ?

ETHELBERT. How much have you spent to-day ?

ALFRED. About seven hundred and fifty pounds.

ETHELBERT. I thought so.

ALFRED. Fancy bought a motor-car this afternoon.

ETHELBERT. She will buy another to-morrow.

ALFRED. But I can't afford it. How did you succeed in curbing her extravagance ?

ETHELBERT. I threatened to advertise in the papers that I should not be responsible for any debts contracted by my wife.

ALFRED. Since she is not my wife I can hardly do that, can I ?

ETHELBERT. You might advertise that you will not be responsible for any debts contracted by *my* wife.

ALFRED. Don't you think that would be a little pointed ?

ETHELBERT. Perhaps it would.

ALFRED. No, Ethelbert, there is only one way out of the difficulty. I will resign Fancy to you.

ETHELBERT. Not on any account.

ALFRED (*rising*). Yes. I cannot allow you to

outbid me in generosity. I will go and find her and bring her to you.

ETHELBERT (*rising*). For Heaven's sake, don't tell my wife I am staying here.

ALFRED. Why not?

ETHELBERT. Because I am not alone.

ALFRED. Not alone?

ETHELBERT. Her name is Delia.

ALFRED (*indignantly*). Ethelbert!

ETHELBERT. Well, Alfred?

ALFRED. You shock me, gravely.

ETHELBERT. You are very thin-skinned. Have you already forgotten what errand brought you to this hotel?

ALFRED (*with dignity*). There is no reason why you should make my lapse an excuse for your own. Have you thought of your wife?

ETHELBERT. She need never know, unless you tell her.

ALFRED. I thought you said that Fancy and you agreed to leave each other entirely free.

ETHELBERT. We gave each other our word of honour.

ALFRED. Then why do you wish to hide the truth from her?

ETHELBERT. Fancy is not a gentleman. She is a woman. She does not understand the meaning of honour.

ALFRED. You are trifling. I regret to say, Ethelbert, that I shall consider it my duty to inform your wife immediately of the whole deplorable business.

ETHELBERT. So be it. Far be it from me to try and induce you to act contrary to the dictates of your conscience.

(FANCY comes in L. with a letter.)

FANCY. Ethelbert!

ETHELBERT. Fancy !

FANCY. How fortunate ! I can give you this letter now. That will save a penny stamp.

ETHELBERT. Thank you. I will destroy the letter. (*He tears it and throws it in the fire.*)

FANCY. Oh, why did you do that ? It took me such a long time to write.

ETHELBERT. I am already aware of its contents.

FANCY. You have told him, Alfred ?

ALFRED. Yes.

FANCY. Then, Ethelbert, may I ask what you are doing here ? I consider it grossly indecorous of you to follow us about like this. You wouldn't like it yourself.

ALFRED. Ethelbert has not followed us. He has come here for a reason of his own.

FANCY. A reason of his own ?

ALFRED. Yes. How can I tell you ? (*A pause.*) Her name is Delia.

FANCY. Oh ! Oh ! Ethelbert, how dare you ?

ETHELBERT. My dear Fancy, you remember what we arranged.

FANCY. I don't care what we arranged. You have had the bad taste to prefer another woman to me. I shall never forgive you.

ETHELBERT. But, Fancy, listen.

FANCY. I shall not listen. I don't want to hear a single word about her. Where did you meet her ?

ETHELBERT. She was staying at my hotel in Edinburgh.

FANCY. That was no reason why you should have spoken to her.

ETHELBERT. I didn't. She spoke to me. We were sitting at adjoining tables in the Winter Garden.

FANCY. She dropped a glove ? A handkerchief ?

ETHELBERT. How did you know that ?

FANCY. Never mind.

ETHELBERT. Of course I picked it up.

FANCY. And what did she say to you ?

ETHELBERT. She said, "Do you know, you've got the most delightfully wicked eyes." That was how it began.

(DELIA comes in R. *She is a tall, gorgeously-dressed and beautiful woman, with a mass of red-gold hair.*)

DELIA (*in a fury*). Really, Bertie, this is too bad. I've been looking for you all over the hotel.

ALFRED. This, I presume, is the lady in question.

ETHELBERT. My dear Delia, I am exceedingly sorry that I have been detained, but this lady is an old acquaintance of mine. She is, in fact, my wife.

DELIA. Indeed. (*To FANCY.*) So you are his wife?

FANCY. As it happens.

DELIA. I am very glad to meet you, if only to have the opportunity of complaining about the way you have trained your husband.

FANCY. I did not train him.

DELIA. That is just what I complain about. Under the circumstances I can forgive his leaving me alone in the Lounge of a strange hotel, but his table manners are frankly uncivilized. Do you know that he reads the morning paper during breakfast?

FANCY. He never does so at home.

DELIA. You must not expect to make me believe that.

FANCY. But it is perfectly true. During breakfast I always read the morning paper myself.

DELIA. Ah, no doubt in self-defence.

FANCY. Not at all.

DELIA. I suppose one can become inured to anything, in time, even to Bertie's light breakfast conversation.

FANCY. That shows how superficial your acquaintance with Ethelbert is. I like his breakfast conversation because he goes on talking without stopping. Consequently, it is not necessary for me to pay any

attention to him, and I can read the morning paper in peace.

ETHELBERT. This is most unkind of you both. My light breakfast conversation has always been much admired, especially by ladies. (*To DELIA.*) I am sure you will alter your opinion if you will only do me the favour, Delia, of listening a little more carefully to-morrow morning.

FANCY. Certainly not.

ETHELBERT. I beg your pardon ?

FANCY. She will have no opportunity of listening to you more carefully.

ETHELBERT. Why not ?

FANCY. Because you will breakfast with me to-morrow morning.

ETHELBERT. Oh, very well, then perhaps *you* will do me the favour of listening more carefully.

FANCY. I fancy that during breakfast to-morrow you will be fully occupied in listening to me, for once in a way. I do not think that I shall have sufficient time to say all I wish to say to you to-night. You have provided me with a very fruitful topic.

ETHELBERT. But, my dear Fancy, I fear we can hardly pursue it to-night. We both appear to have previous engagements.

DELIA (*to ETHELBERT*). You have no previous engagement.

ETHELBERT. Delia !

DELIA. It is cancelled.

ETHELBERT. You are cruel, Delia.

DELIA. It is your own fault. How can you expect any self-respecting woman to put up with the treatment I have received from you ?

FANCY. May I ask what further complaint you have to make about my husband ?

DELIA. He has no sense of decency. I consider it grossly indecent of him to bring me to this hotel whilst you are stopping here. I have never been treated in such a manner before.

FANCY. I think you take a very proper view of the affair. Ethelbert ought to be thoroughly ashamed of himself.

DELIA. Good-bye, Bertie. (*She holds out her hand.*) I shall never listen to your light breakfast conversation again.

FANCY. And good-bye, Alfred. (*She holds out her hand.*) My only regret is that I shall never know what your light breakfast conversation is like.

ALFRED. Don't say that, Fancy. Why shouldn't we all four have breakfast together in the morning?

DELIA. No. I am sorry, but I must draw the line somewhere.

FANCY. You are right. You have the most perfect taste. I am beginning to admire you immensely. Good-bye.

DELIA. Good-bye.

FANCY. Good-night, Alfred.

ALFRED. Good-night, Fancy.

FANCY. Come, Ethelbert. (*She takes his arm.*)

ETHELBERT (*to DELIA and ALFRED*). Good-night.

(*FANCY and ETHELBERT go out L. A pause.*)

DELIA (*raising her eyebrows*). Well?

ALFRED. Well?

DELIA. And what do we do now?

ALFRED. Would you like some supper?

DELIA. No, thanks. (*She sits in an armchair by the fire.*) You may order me some champagne if you like.

ALFRED. Willingly.

(*ALFRED rings an electric bell, and then sits facing DELIA in the other armchair. They look straight at each other for a time.*)

DELIA (*at length, leaning forward*). Do you know,
you've got the most delightfully wicked eyes.

CURTAIN.

(*This play should be acted with the most perfect seriousness and polish. It should not be played in a spirit of burlesque. It should be beautifully acted, beautifully costumed and beautifully staged.*)

THE MASTER OF THE
HOUSE

"The Master of the House"
was produced at the Gaiety
Theatre, Manchester, in
September, 1910.

CHARACTERS

Mr. OVENS

FRED OVENS, his Son

Mrs. OVENS, his Second Wife

EDIE, Mrs. Ovens' Sister

Dr. JELLICOE

Mr. SKRIMSHIRE, a Solicitor

The Scene is the parlour in the house o Mr. OVENS

THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE

The scene is triangular ; only two walls of MR. OVENS' parlour being visible. The left-hand wall is the longer. A window with a dark blind is near the spectator and further away is the fireplace. In the right-hand wall is the door, leading into a hall or passage. By the hearth, with its back to the spectator, is an arm-chair ; it would be full in the light from the window if the blind were up and the sun were shining into the room. In the middle of the room is a big round table and three chairs. A sideboard is below the door ; and a bureau, a sofa, and other chairs are in the room.

The place is comfortable ; the room of a hard-headed peasant come to town and fairly successful there ; of a man who without any advantages of birth or assistance of friends has carved out his two or three hundred a year competence for his old age ; by severe economy and lucky speculations in small things.

It is an autumn evening. The fire is low, and the incandescent gas-burner by the hearth is lighted.

MR. OVENS is sitting in the arm-chair with his back to the spectator. His face is not visible, but one can see his whitish-grey hair and his bent back. EDIE and MRS. OVENS are sitting on opposite sides of the table, finishing a supper of bread and cheese and coffee. MRS. OVENS is a hard, vigorous, capable woman of 35 ; EDIE a rather pleasant girl of 23.

EDIE. Won't *he* have any supper ? (*Nodding at MR. OVENS.*)

MRS. OVENS. He ? (*Jerking her head towards MR. OVENS.*) No ; he had his bread and milk at six o'clock. I shan't give him any more before he goes to bed.

EDIE (*glancing at clock*). It's half-past eight now.

MRS. O. He doesn't eat much. Slops and things of that sort. I have to feed him like a baby ; he makes such a mess of his clothes if I don't. (*Looking into the coffee jug.*) Will you have a drop more coffee ? There's only enough for one.

EDIE. No, I don't care about it.

MRS. O. Then I'll finish it. (*She pours out the coffee.*) I'd have fancied an onion with my cheese to-night, but Mr. Skrimshire's coming in to see *him* (*jerking her head backwards at MR. OVENS*), and they make your breath smell so.

EDIE. Mr. Skrimshire ; he's the solicitor that lives up at Bank Top ?

MRS. O. Yes. *He (jerk of head)* used to take all his bits of business to Skrimshire's office in Salchester ; and since he's so ill now and can't get up to town, young Mr. Skrimshire said he'd look in and see him to-night.

EDIE. What does he want to see Mr. Skrimshire for ?

MRS. O. (*smiling mysteriously*). Ah, aha.

EDIE. Can *he* hear us ?

MRS. O. Hear us ? No fear. He's so deaf that he'd sit there as quiet as a mouse if the world was coming to an end and the last trump sounding.

EDIE (*coaxing*). Then tell me.

MRS. O. (*with a backward jerk*). He's going to alter his will, at last.

EDIE. My word ! Going to cut Fred out ?

MRS. O. (*compressing her lips*). That I can't say.

EDIE. Is he going to leave everything to you ?

MRS. O. Nor that either. But if he did, wouldn't I have deserved it ?

EDIE. He's been a lot of trouble to you these five years.

MRS. O. Trouble! You may well say that. Let alone my marrying him when I was only thirty, and I might easy have found some young fellow who'd have been glad to ask me.

EDIE. I said at the time you were daft; and he a widower with a son older than yourself.

MRS. O. He was sixty-six when I married him; he's seventy-one now. He'll not last much longer, and I'm only thirty-five.

EDIE. I never thought to see him pull through that last attack. It's to be hoped he doesn't linger.

MRS. O. No, it would be a mercy if he were taken quickly. A mercy for him, I mean.

EDIE. And for you, too, if it comes to that.

MRS. O. You'd never believe the work I have with him. Dressing him, and undressing him, and getting him up and down the stairs. He won't stop in his bedroom out of the way; must be down here in his arm-chair. I could shake him sometimes, he's that stupid.

(*There's a knock at the front door.*)

MRS. O. Go and see who it is, Edie. It's too early for Mr. Skrimshire yet, surely. Perhaps it's the doctor; he's not been to-day.

(*EDIE goes out. MRS. OVENS rises and goes to hearth.*)

(*To MR. OVENS, loudly.*) Are you quite warm enough? (*MR. OVENS does not reply.*) You'll have to wake up when Mr. Skrimshire comes. (*Grumbling to herself.*) I don't know why you can't stop in bed; you do nothing but sleep down here.

(*EDIE runs in rather scared.*)

EDIE. Annie, it's Fred!

MRS. O. Fred?

EDIE. Fred Ovens. His son !

MRS. O. What does he want ?

(FRED OVENS follows EDIE into the room. He is a tall, well-built, heavy man of 36. He is awkward and sullen, almost brutish ; but also rather a striking, handsome man in a clumsy way. He has a moustache ; and wears rough country clothes, very shabby but almost picturesque. A coloured muffler is round his neck, and he carries a cap.)

FRED. That's a fine way to welcome a fellow when he comes home.

MRS. O. This isn't your home.

FRED. I want to have a word with you, Annie. You'll excuse me calling you Annie ; I never could bring myself to call you mother.

MRS. O. You can call me what you please so long as you take yourself away from here.

FRED (seeing MR. OVENS). Ay ; there he is.

MRS. O. He doesn't want to see you.

FRED. I reckon I don't want to see him, either. Last time I came he banged the front door in my face.

MRS. O. Small wonder, either, seeing you came straight from gaol, without even waiting for your hair to grow. He told you never to let him see you again

FRED. You're as fond of me as ever, Annie.

MRS. O. Now look here, Fred Ovens. I'm boss here. If you don't get out of this house in two minutes I'll send Edie for the police.

FRED. Damn it ; you'll give me something to eat.

MRS. O. I will not.

FRED. I'm starving. I've not eaten a bit since yesterday.

MRS. O. That's no affair of mine.

EDIE. Give him something to eat, Annie.

MRS. O. No.

EDIE. He's hungry. He'll go away quiet after.

(MRS. OVENS hesitates.) There's some bread and cheese here. Do, now.

MRS. O. (*relenting*). You can have a bite of bread and cheese.

FRED (*sarcastically polite*). Thank you, Annie.

EDIE. Can I get him some beer?

MRS. O. (*grudgingly*). If you like.

FRED. That's good of you, Edie. I always knew my old father chose the wrong one when he married Annie.

(EDIE goes out for the beer. FRED sits in the chair on the right of the table.)

MRS. O. (*sitting on the left of the table*). Mind, you get outside this house as soon as you've finished.

FRED (*eating*). You talk to me so like my father that I think I'll have to call you "mother" in future.

MRS. O. Don't let me have any of your lip. And just keep quiet or you'll wake your father, and then there'll be a fine row. He'd never forgive me for letting you come in here.

(EDIE returns with a jug of beer and a glass.)

FRED. Thank you, my dear. (*He pours out beer.*) Good health, father. (*He drinks.*) I hear he's not been so well lately.

MRS. O. He's never been the same since you came and told him you'd been in gaol, and he turned you out. He had a stroke that night.

FRED. Ah!

MRS. O. We thought his mind was clean broken down for a time. He couldn't speak properly, or attend to his business. Indeed, he's only just getting right again now.

FRED. It's lucky he's got such a good, kind wife to look after him.

MRS. O. Be sharp with that, now, and clear out. (*She rises.*)

FRED. Before I clear out there's something else I want you to do for me.

MRS. O. What's that?

(FRED *smiles*.)

You'll get nothing else, I promise you.

FRED. You'll give me some money, won't you?

MRS. O. Not a penny.

FRED. Come—mother.

MRS. O. Not a penny, I say. We've no money to give away here.

FRED. Lend me some, then.

MRS. O. Lend *you*!

FRED. I'll pay you back.

MRS. O. You'll never be able to pay anything back

FRED. Some time. When he's gone. (*Nodding at MR. OVENS*.)

MRS. O. (*grimly smiling*). I don't think so.

(FRED looks at her in silence, and pushes his plate away.)

FRED. What? Has he cut me off, then?

MRS. O. What do you deserve?

FRED. Isn't he going to leave me anything?

MRS. O. I don't know what he's done.

FRED (*angrily*). Has he altered his will? (*He rises*.)

MRS. O. (*alarmed*). Sit down. No, he's not altered his will.

FRED (*relieved, and sitting down again*). Ah! Then there *will* be something. He divided it all between you and me; the money and the houses.

MRS. O. I believe he did.

FRED. Now look here. (*He leans back in his chair and pulls out his empty trousers' pockets*.) That's all I've got in the world. If you'll lend me ten quid I'll not trouble you again for a long time.

MRS. O. Why don't you *earn* your living?

FRED. I've tried.

MRS. O. Tried indeed! You don't want to work.

FRED. It's not so easy to get work as you may think.

MRS. O. Where have you been trying?

FRED. In Salchester.

MRS. O. You've been at those meetings of the unemployed?

FRED. Yes, I've done a deal of talking at them.

MRS. O. I thought so; that's about all you're fit for. Have you done now?

FRED (*leaning back in his chair*). Ay, I've done.

MRS. O. Then you'd better be going.

FRED. You're mighty free with your tongue, mother. Suppose I said I wouldn't go?

MRS. O. I'd have you turned out. I'm master in this house.

FRED (*nodding to MR. OVENS*). What about him? I thought he was master.

MRS. O. You thought wrong then. But you can wake him up if you like and see what he'll say.

FRED. No, I know what he'll say. (*Rising and walking round to MR. OVENS*) Yes; you've been a good father to me.

MRS. O. You've been a good son to him, haven't you?

FRED (*not heeding her*). You turned me out of doors when I needed helping; you hate me. Well, I don't love you, neither.

MRS. O. Are you going?

FRED. I'm going. (*He moves towards the door*.) Give me some money.

MRS. O. Not a farthing.

(*There is a knock at the front door. EDIE goes out*.)

MRS. O. Drat it, there's Mr. Skrimshire, and me not ready for him. That's your fault.

FRED. Well, I'm going, aren't I? Who's this coming?

MRS. O. Some one to see your father on business.

(EDIE *reappears.*)

EDIE. Mr. Skrimshire's come, Annie.

(MR. SKRIMSHIRE, *a very smartly-dressed young fellow of about 27, comes in briskly. He is the son and junior partner of old SKRIMSHIRE, MR. OVENS' solicitor.*)

MR. SKRIMSHIRE. Good evening, Mrs. Ovens.

MRS. O. Good evening, Mr. Skrimshire.

MR. S. My father's getting on, you know, and he doesn't like turning out again after he gets home from town ; and since Mr. Ovens is too ill to come to the office, my father thought he wouldn't mind giving *me* his instructions.

MRS. O. Oh, certainly, Mr. Skrimshire. I'll make room for you here. (*She moves the things from a corner of the table and puts a chair for MR. SKRIMSHIRE facing the spectator.*)

MR. S. (*looking at MR. OVENS*). The old gentleman's having a doze, I see. Pity to waken him up. (*He sits.*) Thank you.

MRS. O. It'll do him good. He's dozing all day long. (*To FRED, who is near the door.*) What are you waiting for ?

MR. S. (*turning round*). Hello ; you're Fred Ovens, aren't you ?

FRED. Yes, sir.

MR. S. I've not seen you about the village for a good while. Have you been away ?

FRED. Yes.

MR. S. What are you doing now ?

FRED. I'm not doing anything just now, sir.

MR. S. Ah, out of work, eh ? I'm sorry.

FRED. Have you come here to cut me out of his will ? (*Nodding at MR. OVENS.*)

MR. S. Have I come here to—my dear man, what are you talking about ?

FRED. You've come to alter his will.

MR. S. (*shrugging his shoulders and raising his eyebrows at MRS. OVENS*). Mrs. Ovens, er—your husband wants to see me alone, doesn't he?

FRED (*to MRS. OVENS*). Tell me if he's come to alter my father's will.

MRS. O. Yes, he has.

MR. S. (*protesting*). Really!

FRED. Is he going to cut me out? (*To MR. SKRIMSHIRE*.) Are you going to cut me out?

MR. S. Don't make a fool of yourself, Ovens. Since Mrs. Ovens has told you, I don't mind saying that I've come here to take your father's instructions for a fresh will. He may be going to cut you out, as you call it, for all I know. On the other hand, he may be going to leave you everything; or again, he may be going to leave everything to the Archbishop of Canterbury. I haven't the least idea what he's going to do, and if I had I shouldn't tell you.

FRED (*going up to MR. OVENS*). You old devil; you're going to cut me out, are you? (*He shakes his fist at him*.) Curse you!

MRS. O. (*seizing Fred*). You leave him alone.

MR. S. (*rising*). Mrs. Ovens, unless I can see your husband alone it is really no use my wasting my time here. (*He replaces some papers in his pocket*.)

(*There is a knock at the front door. EDIE runs out.*)

FRED (*turning to MR. SKRIMSHIRE*). All right, Mr. Skrimshire, you don't need to disturb yourself. I'm going.

MR. S. That's right, Ovens. I'm glad you're not going to be stupid. Look here; come and see me at the office some day next week, and I'll see if I can find you a job.

FRED. That's good of you. Why do you make an offer like that to me?

MR. S. You may be a client of ours some day.

(EDIE shows in DR. JELLICOE, a jolly, stout medical man of about 40.)

DR. JELLICOE. Good evening, Mrs. Ovens. (*He looks at FRED, but doesn't know him. He speaks to MR. SKRIMSHIRE.*) Hello, Jimmy, what are you doing here? (*Without waiting for an answer.*) I'm disgracefully late, aren't I? I was called away to Wraysford to young Mrs. Amore. An urgent case, but it turned out all right, I'm happy to say. A fine boy. That's why I'm so late. Can't be helped. These things happen in the best regulated families, don't they?

MRS. O. Well, doctor, where should we be if they didn't?

DR. J. Quite so, quite so. And how's the patient?

MRS. O. Not been so well to-day, doctor.

DR. J. Asleep, I see. I'll just have a look at him. Won't keep you a minute, Skrimshire.

MR. S. Don't hurry on my account, old chap.

(DR. JELLICOE walks round in front of the table and approaches MR. OVENS from the back.)

DR. J. (*very loudly*). Good evening, Mr. Ovens. (*He taps his shoulder gently.*) Wake up, sir, and let me have a look at you.

(DR. JELLICOE takes another step and turns, facing the spectator, to look MR. OVENS in the face. Hardly has he glanced at MR. OVENS than his own face changes in an instant, and assumes an expression of horror and surprise. He starts back.)

DR. J. (*in a very different tone*). How long has he been like this?

(They are all startled by the doctor's tone.)

MRS. O. Like—like what, doctor?

(Without replying, DR. JELLICOE takes MR. OVENS' wrist, feels the pulse, and lets the hand drop again on

the knee. He places his hand on the heart. Then he straightens up and looks at the others.)

MRS. O. Doctor, what is it?

DR. J. (*quietly*). Mr. Ovens is dead.

(*They all stare at the doctor, spellbound.*)

FRED (*in a low, deep voice*). Dead!

MR. S. (*in a whisper*). Good gracious!

(*A slight pause. MRS. OVENS gives a low wail, and sinking into the chair left of the table breaks into a painful storm of sobs. She quickly subsides into a gentler subdued weeping, with her head buried in her arms. EDIE comforts her. FRED sits down on a chair near the door, stunned. MR. SKRIMSHIRE gently crosses and looks at MR. OVENS, and stands by the doctor.*)

MR. S. This is really an awful business, Jellicoe.

DR. J. He must have been dead two or three hours.

MR. S. Really! What an extraordinary thing.
Will there have to be an inquest?

DR. J. No, I've been attending him. I expected something of the sort would happen.

MR. S. It's a bit of a shock, all the same. It's made me feel quite queer.

DR. J. I suppose you've nothing more to do here, now?

MR. S. No; at least, I'd better have a word with young Ovens, and see if there's anything I can do.

DR. J. I've one more call to make. (*Looking at his watch*). Come round and have a bit of supper and a game of billiards when you've finished here.

MR. S. I will. Thanks very much.

(*MR. SKRIMSHIRE returns to the table and studies some papers.*)

DR. J. (*touching MRS. OVENS on the shoulder*).

Come, come, you mustn't give way like this. We've been expecting it, you know, we've been expecting it.

MRS. O. (*tearfully*). Yes.

DR. J. I should get him on to a couch, or a bed, or something like that, so that all the necessary arrangements can be made. Er—you know whom to send for?

MRS. O. (*shaking her head*). No.

DR. J. I'll leave an address. A very decent woman.

(*He writes an address on the back of an envelope and puts it on the table.*)

MRS. O. (*looking round at the figure of MR. OVENS*). Edie, get something—something to put over him.

(EDIE goes out.)

DR. J. Well now, there you are. I'll call round again in the morning and see you. First thing. Good-bye, my dear Mrs. Ovens ; good-bye. I'm very sorry. (*As he passes MR. SKRIMSHIRE.*) Don't be long.

(DR. JELLINE goes out.)

MR. S. (*gently to FRED*). Er—Mr. Ovens.

FRED (*rising*). Sir ? (*Coming to the table and sitting in the right chair.*) This makes a difference, sir?

MR. S. The old will is valid, of course ; the will he intended to supersede.

(MRS. OVENS sits up and listens to the conversation.)

MR. S. You are both acquainted with its provisions, I understand ?

FRED. I know he divided everything between her and me.

MR. S. That was it, roughly. And nothing fairer could have been arranged, in my opinion.

(EDIE comes in with a white sheet. She gently places

this over the body of MR. OVENS, so that it entirely drapes the seated figure like a shroud. They watch her in silence and then MR. SKRIMSHIRE continues; he refers to a paper.)

He left this house and the one next door to you, Mr. Ovens; the two houses in Hawthorn Lane to you, ma'am. The money invested is divided into two equal parts. Of course, yours is only for life, Mrs. Ovens. On your death—or remarriage—it passes to Mr. Fred here.

MRS. O. (*with a sob*). Yes.

MR. S. I happened to bring a note of these provisions with me, for reference in the business which, er—for which there was no occasion.

(MR. SKRIMSHIRE rises, putting away his papers.)

That is all, I think. I won't intrude any longer. Terrible business. Very sorry. (*He goes to the door.*) Er—perhaps you will look us up at the office in a day or two, Mr. Ovens. We have acted for your father for a good many years, and we shall be very pleased to act for you if you wish it.

FRED. Thank you, sir. I dare say I'll call.

(EDIE shows MR. SKRIMSHIRE out.)

(*A pause.* MRS. OVENS looks at FRED.)

MRS. O. And now, perhaps *you'll* go, and leave me alone with my grief.

FRED. I don't stir from here.

MRS. O. It was *his* wish you shouldn't stop in this house. I'll see *that* carried out, at any rate.

FRED. You're forgetting one thing, mother.

MRS. O. What's that?

(EDIE returns.)

FRED. This is *my* house now. He left it me in his will.

(MRS. OVENS sits up and stares at him.)

You're not boss here any longer. Neither is he. I'm master of the house.

(MRS. OVENS rises to her feet.)

It's not me that's got to clear out ; it's you.

MRS. O. Me !

EDIE. Fred, you'll not turn her out to-night ?

FRED. I will indeed.

MRS. O. I won't go.

FRED. If you don't go I'll put you out.

MRS. O. You wouldn't dare.

FRED. There's nothing I'd like better.

(MRS. OVENS hesitates a second and then breaks down.)

MRS. O. Oh ! I can't go to-night. To think that I was saying to Edie only just now what a worry he was, not knowing that he'd never trouble me again. (Appealing to him.) Fred.

FRED (implacable.) Get your hat and coat and take yourself off.

MRS. O. Edie, what am I to do ?

EDIE. You'd better come home with me to-night, if he means it.

FRED. I do mean it.

(MRS. OVENS dries her eyes, and gets up again.)

MRS. O. You're glad that he's dead. (She goes out.)

FRED. I'm not, though he was a hard man and he treated me harshly. I'd give a good deal if I hadn't stood there and cursed him a short while ago.

EDIE (turning on him). You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Fred Ovens. I never heard of such a thing. What, turn a wife out of the house when her husband's not yet cold !

FRED (sullenly). She was for turning me out.

EDIE. You know what her temper is. I thought better of you, indeed I did. No Christian would do what you're doing.

(MRS. OVENS returns with coat and bonnet on.)

Fred, let her stay to-night. She's your father's wife, remember.

FRED. That's why I'm turning her out. (Strolling over to MR. OVENS and addressing him.) I'll show you who's master of the house now.

MRS. O. There's no need to waste words on him, Edie. I wouldn't stop in his house now if he went down on his bended knees. Come along. (EDIE goes out.) Good night, Fred Ovens. You're master of the house, and may you pass a pleasant night in it with the man you cursed when he sat dead in his chair.

(MRS. OVENS goes out.)

(The front door bangs. FRED shivers and moves to the front of the table and sits on the edge. He laughs quietly.)

FRED. Pleasant night. Why shouldn't I? (To MR. OVENS.) You won't interfere with me. I'm not afraid of you. What is there to be afraid of? (He looks round fearfully and his eye again returns to MR. OVENS' figure.) You can't turn me out of doors now. I'm boss here. (The figure does not take any notice. FRED shivers again.) I'll go round to the King's Arms and have a drink, there'll be company there. (To MR. OVENS quickly.) But I'll come back for the night, mind you. You'll not drive me away. (He goes to the gas and turns it out, leaving the room in perfect darkness. He gropes his way to the door. Here he pauses.) I've no money. (He thinks.) They always used to keep some money in the sideboard drawer. (He gropes his way to the sideboard on the extreme right and stumbles against a chair.) Can't see a thing, and I've no matches. Wait a minute. (He crosses to the window and pulls up the blind. Bright moonlight strikes

through the window. He crosses to the sideboard and easily finds the drawer, opens it and searches. There is no money to be found. He takes a cash-box and turns towards the window with it to examine it carefully. As he turns he comes full on the silent figure of MR. OVENS, sitting rigid in his chair, shrouded in white, ghastly in the glare of the moon. FRED starts back with an oath and drops the cash-box.) You can't frighten me. You shan't turn me out, I tell you. I'm master of the house. (He sits on the edge of the table looking at the figure for a long space. Then he speaks in a low strained voice.) Don't look at me like that. Don't look at me like that! I didn't know you were dead when I cursed you. (Another pause: he shudders and covers his face with his hands.) God! I can't stand it. (He steals silently out of the room. MR. OVENS sits in his shroud in the moonlight, master of the house. The front door is heard closing.)

(THE CURTAIN DESCENDS VERY SLOWLY.)

PHIPPS

*Another version of this play was performed by
Mr. Arthur Bourchier at the Garrick Theatre,
London, on Tuesday, November 19, 1912,
with the following cast:—*

PHIPPS . Mr. Arthur Bourchier.

GERALD . Mr. A. E. Matthews.

FANNY . Miss Rosalie Toller.

CHARACTERS

PHIPPS, a Butler.

LADY FANNY.

SIR GERALD.

SCENE.—Sir Gerald's Library.

PHIPPS

SCENE.—*The library of SIR GERALD'S London house is a handsome, comfortable place, with very few books in it. There are plenty of easy chairs, rugs, rich hangings and good water-colours.*

(SIR GERALD and LADY FANNY are discovered in the midst of an absorbing, if not a heated, colloquy. Both are about thirty, and extremely good-looking ; they wear evening clothes, which cause them to look even less than thirty and more good-looking than ever. SIR GERALD is slight in build, and his enemies might call him a bit of a dude. He is a pleasant enough fellow, nevertheless. LADY FANNY is gorgeous and shimmering, acute and witty, full of hasty enthusiasms and queer impulses. You like her, but she is a disconcerting woman, all the same. You never know what she is going to say next. SIR GERALD is standing in the middle of the room, and LADY FANNY is leaning forward in an arm-chair. Suddenly she rises and sweeps towards SIR GERALD with a superb gesture).

LADY FANNY. Very well then, hit me ! Hit me ! Hit me, do you hear ?

(SIR GERALD steps forward as if about to strike her, and raises his arm ; but instead of hitting her he merely scratches his head in a perplexed way.)

LADY F. Well, why don't you hit me ? I'm waiting to be hit. (She turns her cheek meekly towards him, as if it were a kiss she is expecting and not a blow.)

SIR GERALD. Er—yes. But I don't think that's quite the—er—quite the idea.

LADY F. You are reluctant to strike a woman, even if she is your wife?

SIR G. On the contrary. If I must strike a woman, I prefer that she be my wife. I have no objection to striking you, my dear; only it is no good doing it in private. In that case, you would be unable to prove my cruelty.

LADY F. The judge ought to take my word for that. Indeed, if the case comes before Sir Frederick Mitchie, I am sure he will, because I know him so well.

SIR G. Sir Frederick is a model of courtesy, and I am certain that he will spare you all the trouble he possibly can; but I am afraid that he will confirm my view that the law insists upon my being cruel to you in public.

LADY F. It will not be necessary, I trust, for you to strike me at the Opera or the Ritz.

SIR G. That would be overdoing it. It would betray the amateur. Reticence is the mark of the true artist. But if you wish to get a divorce there must be a witness of some sort when I strike you.

LADY F. Ring for the servants.

SIR G. (*shocked*). The servants! My dear! Perhaps I am prudish and even old-fashioned, but the servants—

LADY F. Then *one* of the servants.

SIR G. Which one?

LADY F. What do you think about Cook?

SIR G. I *never* think about Cook.

LADY F. I mean as a witness.

SIR G. Oh! I am afraid that Cook might be inclined to talk.

LADY F. Perhaps you are right. She is naturally a gossip. I suggested her because she has already been married three times, and would probably make an interested and even a sympathetic spectator.

SIR G. Why not your maid?

LADY F. Robinson? No. Robinson knows quite enough about me already.

SIR G. There's that parlour-maid—the one with frizzy hair.

LADY F. She is *much* too young. I should prefer Phipps.

SIR G. Phipps! My dear Fanny, do you think Phipps would like it?

LADY F. You might hint to him that we would consider it in his wages.

SIR G. But Phipps is a most respectable man.

LADY F. That is why I should prefer him. He is discreet. I could place myself in his hands without reserve.

SIR G. He is certainly a perfect butler.

LADY F. Will you ring for him, dear?

SIR G. Willingly.

(SIR GERALD rings the bell.)

LADY F. You absolutely decline to give me those pearls?

SIR G. Absolutely.

LADY F. Very well. As soon as Phipps arrives, you will be good enough to strike me.

SIR G. Certainly. That is the idea, I believe.

LADY F. Yes. I think about here—

(She chooses a position in the middle of the room, and places SIR GERALD conveniently opposite to her.)

That will do nicely. By the way, Gerald, you won't hurt me, will you?

SIR G. I am a gentleman, Fanny. I hope that I shall always behave as one, no matter what provocation you offer me.

LADY F. Thank you, Gerald.

SIR G. At the same time, Fanny, I must remind you that although I shall not use actual violence, it will be necessary for you to convey the impression that I am hurting you.

LADY F. Oh, I see. Of course. (*She nods.*) Very well. I promise you I'll do that. Hush, here he is.

(*They take up their attitudes again.*)

(PHIPPS, a large, pleasant, discreet man of forty-five, enters and stands by the door.)

LADY F. (as before). Very well then, hit me ! Hit me ! Hit me, do you hear ?

(SIR GERALD steps forward and strikes LADY FANNY.)

(Crying out) Oh ! oh ! You've hit me ! You coward !

(LADY FANNY collapses into the easy chair, sobbing. Her prostration is so complete that she might have been run over by a steam-roller, instead of having been rather delicately slapped upon the shoulder. As she cowers in the chair, SIR GERALD steps forward with a threatening air, evidently intending to strike her again. PHIPPS, however, rapidly advances, hits SIR GERALD a sound blow under the jaw, catches him by the coat collar and flings him aside, tripping him up as he does so in such wise that SIR GERALD tumbles on to the floor in a heap. PHIPPS stands calmly over the prostrate baronet, in the attitude of a butler awaiting orders.)

PHIPPS. You rang, my lady.

(LADY FANNY stares open-mouthed at PHIPPS.)

Was this what you rang for, my lady ? (He indicates the figure of SIR GERALD.)

LADY F. (admiringly). Phipps ! How strong you are ! I never knew before that you were so strong.

(SIR GERALD attempts to get up.)

PHIPPS. I beg your pardon, sir, but if you don't lie quiet I shall be obliged to knock you down again ; with all respect to you, sir.

SIR G. Do you know that you've nearly broken my jaw?

PHIPPS. I am aware, sir, that I have taken rather a liberty with you, but, as man to man, you will understand that I had no alternative.

SIR G. Confound you! Will you let me get up?

(SIR GERALD sits on his haunches and scowls up at PHIPPS.)

PHIPPS. I think it would be better, sir, if you would retain your present position for the moment.

SIR G. (to LADY FANNY). This is all your fault, Fanny. It was your idea to ring for Phipps. (To PHIPPS.) Go away, and send Cook here.

PHIPPS. I am sorry, sir, but unless I can have some assurance that you will behave yourself, I cannot trust you with any woman, not even with Cook.

LADY F. But what do you propose to do now, Phipps? We cannot prolong this situation indefinitely.

PHIPPS. I propose to remain here until I have Sir Gerald's word of honour that he will strike neither you, my lady, nor Cook, for whom he asks in his wrath; in the hope, no doubt, that I shall permit him to treat her differently from you because of her inferior station. It is true that Cook's father is a green-grocer in the Edgware Road, and that yours, my lady, is a Duke. But though I am a sound Conservative in politics, I confess that I am unable to consider distinctions of rank where a woman is in distress or danger. In such a case as this I am not a butler, but a man, and as a man I feel that I stand in *loco parentis* both to you, my lady, and to Cook. I represent Mr. Perkins, the green-grocer, as well as his Grace.

LADY F. Phipps! How blind I have been! You have been a perfect butler for three years without my ever suspecting that you were a man.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lady, that is the secret of my success as a butler.

(SIR GERALD makes an attempt to get up.)

Do you mind remaining in a semi-recumbent posture, sir? (To LADY FANNY). I am extremely sorry that I have forgotten myself on this occasion, my lady, but I can assure you that I shall try and not let it occur again.

SIR G. For Heaven's sake, Fanny, make the fellow let me get up.

LADY F. Oh, yes, Phipps, you must allow Sir Gerald to get up now. I undertake that he will behave himself.

PHIPPS. Very good, my lady.

(PHIPPS assists SIR GERALD to rise.)

I can take your word for it, I am sure.

(PHIPPS takes a small clothes-brush out of a desk drawer, and brushes SIR GERALD'S coat.)

LADY F. We are very much obliged to you, Phipps—perhaps I should say I am very much obliged to you—for the devotion you have shown to-day. It is painful for me to have to tell you that it is mistaken. You have been deceived by appearances.

PHIPPS (brushing). Appearances, my lady?

LADY F. Perhaps I should say by my talent for acting. You never saw me play in the theatricals at Tatsworth in the old days, did you?

PHIPPS. I never had that pleasure, my lady.

(PHIPPS replaces the brush, and stands attentively by LADY FANNY.)

LADY F. On more than one occasion I was mistaken for a professional.

PHIPPS. A professional actress, my lady?

LADY F. Certainly.

PHIPPS. I am not surprised, my lady; it is sur-

prising how little experience some of our best-known actresses possess.

SIR G. Damn it all, we seem to be drifting into a discussion about the stage now.

LADY F. One moment, Gerald. Phipps, I find, is an intelligent critic of modern acting. (*To PHIPPS.*) You never realized that when Sir Gerald struck me my emotional outburst was assumed ?

PHIPPS. Not for one moment, my lady.

LADY F. He is an *extremely* intelligent critic of acting ! Sir Gerald did not hurt me, Phipps. At least, not very much.

PHIPPS. I cannot imagine Sir Gerald hurting anybody very much. (*To SIR GERALD.*) I beg your pardon, sir; I'm sure you did your best.

SIR G. Don't apologize to me, pray. I can't help feeling that you would be able to discuss my character more freely if you would allow me to retire.

PHIPPS. Not at all, sir. Your presence does not embarrass us in the least.

LADY F. I asked Sir Gerald to strike me.

PHIPPS. Ah, my lady, it is good of you to try and shield Sir Gerald. You'll be telling me next that you rang for me in order to come and see him strike you.

LADY F. As a matter of fact, that is precisely what did occur. We were in a slight domestic difficulty, and we required your assistance.

SIR G. Look here ! Is there any need to tell all this to Phipps ?

PHIPPS. If I am to be of any use, sir, it will be necessary for you to tell me everything. Otherwise I can hardly give you the full benefit of my advice.

LADY F. I have just had a violent quarrel with Sir Gerald.

PHIPPS. I have observed with regret that you have had a great many quarrels with Sir Gerald of late.

LADY F. This is by far the worst that we have ever

had. Sir Gerald complains that I am extravagant.

SIR G. I appeal to you, Phipps, as a married man—you *are* married, aren't you?

PHIPPS. Not at present, sir. I *was* married. My wife divorced me.

LADY F. Oh, dear! How was that?

SIR G. My dear—ought we to ask?

PHIPPS. There were very excellent reasons for the step.

LADY F. How glad I am that we decided to have you in, Phipps. Your experience will be most useful. I am going to divorce Sir Gerald.

PHIPPS. Oh, my lady! Reflect. I hold no brief for Sir Gerald, but after all he is your husband.

LADY F. Yes. That is why I am going to divorce him.

PHIPPS. I hope you will think twice before doing so, my lady.

LADY F. We have not shocked you, I trust, Phipps?

PHIPPS. No, my lady. I have lived with you too long to be easily shocked. But since you have been good enough to take me into your confidence, I beg leave to urge you most strongly to make it up with Sir Gerald.

SIR G. Look here, Phipps. We didn't invite you here to give us a lecture.

PHIPPS. Then, sir, may I ask why you *did* ring for me?

LADY F. We rang for you to be a witness. From your past experience you must be aware that it is necessary for a woman to prove both adultery and cruelty before she can obtain a divorce.

PHIPPS. Or desertion and cruelty.

LADY F. There is no difference. The one implies the other. Now do you understand our difficulty?

PHIPPS. Forgive me, my lady, if I say that the difficulty does not seem to me an insuperable one.

LADY F. Oh, the desertion or what-do-you-call-it would be easy enough, of course, especially to Sir Gerald. It is the cruelty that presents the difficulty. You see, whatever Sir Gerald has done, he has never made a practice of hitting me.

SIR G. I hope I know where to draw the line.

LADY F. We were expecting that you would understand everything, and would help to make things all so easy for us. Phipps, am I to be disappointed in you, after all?

PHIPPS. No, my lady. That shall never be. (*To SIR GERALD.*) You and her ladyship have definitely decided to separate?

SIR G. Yes.

PHIPPS. Nothing I can say will prevent you?

SIR G. Nothing.

LADY F. Nothing.

PHIPPS. There is—excuse me—no other lady?

SIR G. Certainly not. I can't afford to keep her ladyship, let alone anybody else.

LADY F. You shall not have to reproach me with that much longer.

PHIPPS. Then may I point out that you have selected a most unpleasant mode of accomplishing your object. To divorce Sir Gerald, it will be necessary for you to transact a lot of cumbersome legal business, to appear in court and have your photograph in the papers, and generally to go through a great deal of disagreeable publicity.

LADY F. All that is quite true, but I don't see how it can be avoided.

PHIPPS. Quite easily, my lady.

LADY F. How?

PHIPPS. By letting Sir Gerald divorce you.

LADY F. Divorce me!—But I have given him no reason to do so.

PHIPPS. Ah, my lady, don't let a little thing like that stand in the way.

SIR G. Eh?

PHIPPS. It is all so simple. You have only to order Robinson to pack for you ; to select a congenial companion ; and to leave the country. Sir Gerald does the rest. It is as easy as taking a Kodak photograph.

LADY F. Really, Phipps, there is something in what you say. Gerald, what do you think ?

SIR G. Well—it's an idea.

(*They consider the matter for a moment.*)

LADY F. There is only one thing troubling me. The choice of the—what did you call him, Phipps ?

PHIPPS. The congenial companion, my lady.

LADY F. Yes. The congenial companion. What a charming way of putting it.

PHIPPS. If you would permit me to suggest a name, my lady—the Earl of Skye—

LADY F. Tony ? I'm very fond of Tony. (*She considers.*) H'm ! No, Phipps, Lord Skye is going to Norway salmon fishing on Saturday. We could hardly expect him to put off his trip just to oblige us in this trifling matter. Gerald ! Can't you think of some one ?

SIR G. What about Harry Roughwood ?

LADY F. No go ! He's down with measles.

SIR G. Ow ! Bad luck. (*He scratches his head.*) I dunno *who* we could get.

LADY F. It's too bad of you, Gerald. You are stupid.

(*They all reflect with the utmost earnestness.*)

PHIPPS. I wonder, my lady, if in this emergency you would allow me to make another suggestion ?

LADY F. Of course, Phipps. Have you thought of some other man ?

PHIPPS. I have, my lady.

LADY F. But is he available ? He may have some other engagement.

PHIPPS. Whether he is available depends upon you and Sir Gerald, my lady.

LADY F. Why! Who is he?

PHIPPS. I was referring to myself, my lady.

LADY F. You!

SIR G. You!

(*There is a pause.*)

LADY F. Oh, but, Phipps, we could hardly expect you to undertake a responsibility of this sort, especially at your present wages.

PHIPPS. It is true, my lady, that you have only engaged me as your butler, but seeing that you are placed in a difficulty, I should be perfectly happy to make myself useful in any capacity.

SIR G. It's jolly good of you, Phipps, it is indeed; but we couldn't think of giving you so much trouble.

PHIPPS. No trouble at all, Sir Gerald. On the contrary, it would be a pleasure.

SIR G. Oh! would it?

LADY F. This is quite an idea. I'm sure, Gerald, that you would prefer a nice respectable man like Phipps to go with me. We must think it over thoroughly. Sit down, Phipps.

PHIPPS. If it's all the same to you, my lady, I should feel more comfortable standing.

LADY F. I insist. Sit here by me.

(LADY FANNY crosses to a settee, and makes room for PHIPPS on it by her side. PHIPPS unwillingly takes the seat indicated.)

LADY F. You said it would be a pleasure. What did you mean by that?

PHIPPS. My lady, now that I know that you and Sir Gerald are estranged, I can speak freely. For the past three years I have cherished an ardent affection for your ladyship.

SIR G. (*startled*). Eh ! What's that ?

LADY F. Phipps ! Do you really mean it ?

PHIPPS. I know it is a great liberty, my lady, to entertain such sentiments towards you, but even a butler is capable of a human attachment ; and under the circumstances I hope that you will be inclined to overlook it this time.

LADY F. And you have managed to conceal your feelings all these years ?

PHIPPS. It has been a struggle, my lady. I have been torn between conflicting emotions. My duty seemed to be to give you a month's notice ; but then came the reflection that if I did so I should never see you again.

LADY F. My poor Phipps ! My heart bleeds for you. What devotion !

PHIPPS. You do not mind, my lady ?

LADY F. I have never been loved like this before. It is a new sensation. Tell me more about yourself. Why did your wife divorce you ?

PHIPPS. Well, my lady——

SIR G. (*who has been roaming about behind the settee in some agitation of mind*). I say, I'm afraid I'm in the way here.

PHIPPS. Not at all, sir.

SIR G. I'll go into another room if I am disturbing you.

PHIPPS. Believe me, sir, I had clean forgotten you were there.

LADY F. Be quiet, Gerald. I don't mind you stopping here if you won't talk. Go on, Phipps. What is it that you propose ?

PHIPPS. That instead of divorcing Sir Gerald, you adopt the far easier course of going away with me and allowing Sir Gerald to divorce you. That would be much pleasanter for all parties. I should never have dared to suggest such a thing, if it were not that your ladyship and Sir Gerald have given each other notice as it were ; leaving you, *so to speak*,

temporarily without a place. I can give you no diamonds, no pearls, my lady. All I can offer is the sincere and pent-up devotion of a man of forty-five, in good health and preservation. Could you bring yourself to accept it, my lady?

LADY F. (*closing her eyes in rapture*). Oh, this is wonderful! Gerald, you never speak to me like this.

PHIPPS. You could hardly expect him to do so, my lady, seeing that you are his wife.

LADY F. *Dare I go with you? What would it be like to love a man for himself alone? (Looking at him earnestly.)* Phipps—you fascinate me—strangely.

SIR G. May I ask what you propose to live on? Will Phipps support you on the emoluments he gains as butler, or do you yourself intend to take up a position as lady's maid?

PHIPPS. There you touch the main difficulty. I fear that her ladyship will find herself in rather poor circumstances for a time, unless you, sir, should think of making her a settlement.

SIR G. I'm damned if I'll make her a settlement.

LADY F. Gerald, there is no need to get angry, even if you *are* ashamed of being mean.

SIR G. I'm not mean.

LADY F. Oh, yes, you are. First you refuse to buy me the pearls, and now you refuse to make us a settlement. I call it *worse* than mean. You are a perfect dog in the manger.

SIR G. I didn't refuse to buy you the pearls. I said I couldn't afford to buy them unless I sold Cleveleys.

LADY F. That comes to much the same thing as refusing, doesn't it?

PHIPPS. My lady, I am waiting for your answer.

SIR G. (*eagerly*). Hold on a bit. One moment, please, Phipps.

PHIPPS (*bowing*). I beg pardon, sir. (*He steps back a pace.*)

SIR G. Look here, Fanny. If I sell Cleveleys and

buy you the pearls, will you promise not to ask me for anything else for a whole year ?

LADY F. A year is too long. I might consider six months.

SIR G. Six months. (*He looks at PHIPPS and reflects.*)

(PHIPPS, *under the impression that he may now speak, takes a step forward. SIR GERALD intercepts him quickly.*)

All right. Six months.

LADY F. And you'll buy me the pearls ? That's a promise.

SIR G. Yes.

LADY F. Then there will be no need for us to get divorced at all, will there ?

PHIPPS (*anxiously*). My lady——

LADY F. Oh, yes, Phipps. I am sorry to disappoint you, Phipps.

PHIPPS. You have decided to remain with Sir Gerald, my lady ?

LADY F. For the present. It will be so much less trouble, after all. But we need not regret the circumstance which caused us to invite your co-operation. It has enabled us to become more closely acquainted than I had thought possible. I am intensely obliged to you for all your kindness. You see how valuable your advice has proved. I hope we shall have the benefit of it on many future occasions.

PHIPPS. No, my lady.

SIR G. No ?

PHIPPS. Never again, my lady.

LADY F. Oh, but why not, Phipps ?

PHIPPS. I regret, my lady, that I cannot remain any longer in your service.

LADY F. But why ? To leave us just when we were beginning to know each other more intimately !

PHIPPS. That is just it, my lady. I have been

so perfect a butler to you for three years, that you never suspected that I was a man. Now you know that I am a man, I shall never be a perfect butler to you again. I give you a month's notice, my lady.

(PHIPPS bows and goes out of the room.)

SIR G. (*wiping his brow in relief*). What a man!

LADY F. Oh, Gerald! If only you would try to be more like him.

(*The Curtain falls quickly, leaving SIR GERALD staring at LADY FANNY in surprise.*)

CURTAIN.

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

*"Honour thy father and thy mother ; that
thy days may be long in the land which
the Lord thy God giveth thee."*

CHARACTERS

Mrs. MOUNTAIN, a Widow
NELLY MOUNTAIN, her Daughter
BOB PAINTER, Nelly's Fiance'
Mr. SHOOSMITH

The Scene is the sitting-room of Mrs. Mountain's house, a small semi-detached dwelling in a southern suburb of Manchester. At the present day.

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

The sitting-room of MRS. MOUNTAIN'S house is a cosy little place, rather abundantly furnished with well-worn but well-preserved furniture. Most of the things were bought nearly thirty years ago. The window, with blinds drawn, is facing the spectator. The fireplace is in the wall on his right, the door in the wall on his left. The sofa, as a rule, is under the window, but to-night it has been pulled out from the wall at an angle, turned with its head up stage and towards the fireplace, so that the occupant can enjoy the warmth of the fire. An arm-chair is on the other side of the hearth, facing the sofa. The table, not a big dining table, but a pretty old-fashioned gate-leg table, has been pushed a little to the spectator's left, to leave room to pass between it and the sofa. A chair is near it, and other chairs and furniture are about the room. A small table stands near the head of the sofa. The fire is lighted, and so are the gases on each side of the fireplace.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN, a big, stout, florid woman of over 50, is lying on the sofa. Her hair is very fair, now turning grey, and she wears it puffed out. She is wearing an elaborate pale-coloured dress, rather too young for her. Eyeglasses are on her nose. She has always a querulous, dissatisfied look, except when she tries to be nice, which is not often. MRS. MOUNTAIN is reading a novel from a suburban circulating library. Presently she yawns and closes the book, and stretches her arms. The book slips from her fingers and falls

behind the sofa on to the floor. She lazily tries to peer over the back of the sofa, but relapses again on to her cushions and rings a small handbell which is on the table by the sofa. She rings it very loudly and long.)

(Presently NELLY MOUNTAIN, a capable but quiet and gentle girl of 25, opens the door.)

NELLY. Was that your bell I heard, mother?

MRS. MOUNTAIN. I've dropped my novel.

NELLY (coming forward). You poor thing. Where is it?

MRS. M. Behind the sofa.

(NELLY picks up the novel.)

NELLY. You've lost your place, too.

MRS. M. It doesn't matter. I can't say it's my style. What have you been doing?

NELLY. Putting away the things from the laundry.

MRS. M. So sorry to bring you all the way downstairs, dear, but you know—

NELLY. Of course; you must keep as quiet as possible. I'd just finished when you rang. I shall stop with you now and read for a while.

(She picks up another novel from the large table.)

MRS. M. (shivering). I'm sure the wind's got into the east again.

NELLY. Do you feel it?

MRS. M. Just a little. (She shivers.)

NELLY. Why haven't you got your shawl?

(NELLY takes a shawl from the back of the arm-chair and arranges it round MRS. MOUNTAIN'S shoulders. Then she kisses her.)

MRS. M. Thank you, dear. I don't know what I should do without you.

(NELLY takes up her novel and sits in the arm-chair and prepares to read.)

MRS. M. Who's your book by, Nelly?

NELLY. Charles Garvice.

MRS. M. Oh, is it? I like Garvice. He's so romantic. Is it good?

NELLY. Awfully. I've got to the most interesting part now.

MRS. M. I can't get on with mine at all. I think it would appeal to you. I suppose you wouldn't like to change, would you?

NELLY. But I'm just in the middle.

MRS. M. Oh, of course, if you're so interested—I dare say I might look at the *Guardian* if you could find it, but the small print always makes my head ache.

NELLY. Don't be silly, dear. (*She puts her novel on the sofa and takes Mrs. Mountain's away.*)

MRS. M. Well, if you insist. You can finish it after I've done with it, can't you? Besides, I dare say Bob will be round soon.

NELLY. I dare say. (*A pause.*) Bob doesn't come round so often as he used to, does he?

MRS. M. I don't know, Nelly; he seems to come a good deal. Perhaps he thinks you've not got so much time on your hands while I'm ill.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN begins to read.)

NELLY. Bob spoke to me very seriously last time.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN takes no notice.)

NELLY. He was at me again to settle when we're to be married.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN goes on reading.)

NELLY. He got quite bad-tempered about it.

MRS. M. Eh? What do you say, dear?

NELLY. I say Bob got quite angry when I told

him I couldn't fix the day until you were a little better.

MRS. M. By the way, Nelly, I think I ought to mention it. I don't know, I'm sure, but I suppose it's a mother's duty, and I've never shirked that, come what may.

NELLY. What on earth are you talking about, mother?

MRS. M. Did you know that Bob takes Gladys Carpenter to the theatre?

NELLY (*incredulously*). Bob? (*She rises and stands by the fire so that her mother can't watch her.*)

MRS. M. He was at the Hippodrome with her last Saturday night.

NELLY. How do you know?

MRS. M. Mrs. Willett told me this afternoon.

NELLY. What does Mrs. Willett know about it?

MRS. M. Her maid Sarah told her. She was in the gallery with her young man, and Bob and Gladys Carpenter were in the arena stalls. You see he takes her into the best seats.

NELLY. Really, mother, it's too bad of you to gossip about Bob with Mrs. Willett.

MRS. M. What could I do, Nelly? I couldn't refuse to listen to her. If people are kind enough to come in and try and entertain me, I can't presume to dictate what they shall talk about. I ought to be only too grateful that any one thinks of me at all, nowadays.

(*There is a loud ring at the front door.*)

NELLY. That's Bob! (*She goes to the door.*) Now, mother, don't say a word about this. I'm sure it's a mistake.

(*NELLY goes out and MRS. MOUNTAIN arranges herself interestingly in her cushions. NELLY comes in with BOB PAINTER, a tall ordinary-looking young man of 29 or 30, with a slight moustache.*)

BOB (*heartily*). Well, Mrs. Mountain. How are you to-day?

MRS. M. (*wanly*). I'm afraid I'm not very well, Bob.

(*She holds out her hand limply. He shakes it.*)

BOB. Sorry to hear that. The boss has given me a couple of tickets for the theatre. He booked them for himself and he can't go, and I didn't refuse them, you bet.

(*He shows the tickets.*)

NELLY. How lovely. Are they for the Royal? That's Fred Terry and Julia Neilson.

BOB. No, they're for the Gaiety.

NELLY. Oh, the Gaiety. (*Her tone is disappointed.*)

BOB. But they say it's very funny all the same. By one of these local authors. Now, buck up, and get ready; we've no time to lose.

NELLY. But—I don't think I can come, Bob.

BOB. What?

NELLY. I don't, really.

BOB. Why not?

NELLY. I don't like to leave mother

BOB. What about the servant?

NELLY. It's her night out.

BOB. Be hanged to her night out!

MRS. M. You know, Bob, a servant will have her night out. You can't get them to stay without it.

BOB. Well, what about Nelly's night out? Isn't she ever going to have one?

MRS. M. I don't want to stand in her way. You mustn't let me prevent you from enjoying yourself, Nelly, if Bob insists on you going—Of course it would be very awkward if I were to have a stroke—with no one in the house.

BOB (*reasoning*). Yes, but why *should* you have a stroke? You look healthy enough. Do you feel like having one?

MRS. M. Yes, you may well say that, Bob. That shows how much you know about my complaint. I never get any sympathy, just because I've a good colour. Let me tell you, that a good colour is one of the very worst symptoms I could possibly have.

BOB. But what is it that's the matter with you, exactly?

MRS. M. Oh well, if you wish me to go into all the details over again—but it'll take some time, I assure you, and you've not too much to spare if you're going to the theatre, let alone that there are *some* things that I *couldn't* very well tell you.

NELLY. It's no use, Bob, mother can't be left alone.

MRS. M. (*with profound resignation*). Oh, it doesn't matter about *me*; it's very good of you all the same—pass me my salts, dear, will you—

NELLY (*passing the bottle of salts from the mantelpiece*). Does your head ache?

MRS. M. It throbs rather badly. I'm afraid it's with talking. (*She smells the salts.*) Of course, if you are *determined* to go, I dare say I can manage. I ought to have my gruel at half-past eight, but I suppose I can get up and make it myself, if the kitchen fire hasn't gone out. And then I shall want to go to bed long before you'll be back, and you know I've always said I shall turn faint some day when I'm going upstairs and fall headlong. I suppose it would kill me if there wasn't anybody in the house to attend to me. And then of course there's my hot-water bottle. I *must* have that when I go to bed, because I have to be very particular about not lying in bed with cold feet. I can manage to fill it myself, I suppose, if there's any hot water in the tap, but if there isn't I should have to boil some, and of course if the kitchen fire *has* gone out that would be very awkward.

NELLY. I know, dear; I shouldn't think of leaving

you alone. I was wondering if Mrs. Willett would come and sit with you.

MRS. M. I dare say she would—though with my head throbbing like it is, I don't really feel equal to talking to Mrs. Willett all evening.

NELLY (*leaning over her and stroking her hair*). Very well, dear, I'll stay with you myself.

BOB (*under his breath*). Oh, damn!

MRS. M. (*faintly*). What did Bob say?

NELLY (*frowning at Bob*). He didn't say anything, dear.

MRS. M. I'm very sorry to stand in the way of your evening's amusement, Bob, but I'm sure you'd never forgive yourself if you came back and found me sitting dead in my chair.

BOB. That's all right, Mrs. Mountain. It's settled. We won't talk about it. I'll stop here with Nelly.

NELLY. Thank you, Bob. (*She smiles at him*.)

BOB. I suppose I can have a pipe. (*He pulls it out*.)

MRS. M. I don't think it will do me any harm.

BOB. Oh, if there's any doubt— (*He is putting it back*.)

MRS. M. No, no. I insist. You must have your pipe.

BOB. Very well. (*He fills and lights his pipe*.)

MRS. M. Whatever happens I won't have it said that I was selfish enough to interfere with anybody else's comfort.

BOB. Well now, Mrs. Mountain, since we're all here, I want to have a little talk with you.

MRS. M. Nelly was saying just now that you—

BOB. Yes, I want to get married. Nelly and I have been engaged close on four years now.

MRS. M. How time flies, doesn't it?

BOB. That's what I'm thinking. I don't like wasting it. When we got engaged we arranged to be married in three years.

NELLY. But you know, Bob, mother was ill then.

BON. I know. And she's been ill ever since, off and on, especially when we begin to talk about fixing the day.

MRS. M. Well, if you think I make a martyr of myself for pleasure—

BON. I don't say you do, and I don't say you don't. What I say is, what does it matter?

MRS. M. Oh, it doesn't matter at all, of course, to a great strong man like you what happens to a poor helpless creature like me.

BON. No, no, I mean, why can't we get married in spite of it.

NELLY. But who would look after mother? Could she—could she come and live with us?

BON (*decidedly*). No.

MRS. M. You've no need to say it like that, Bob. I'm not the sort of person to push myself where I'm not wanted, even if I haven't got a relation in the world except Nelly, barring my sister Jinny, who lives at Newcastle-on-Tyne and couldn't look after me if she were willing, seeing that she's got a husband and eleven children to look after already; and if that's not enough for one woman, I don't know.

BON. Now look here. We're arranging the summer holidays at the warehouse. We've got to do it early on, so as not to clash with one another. I've the chance of ten days at the end of June. Just the right time for a honeymoon. (*He produces a pocket diary*). Will you fix the day for June 21? That's just under three months off.

NELLY. What do you think, mother?

MRS. M. You mustn't mind me. I shall be dead and gone by that time, as likely as not.

NELLY (*gently*). But, dear, we've got to fix it some time or other.

MRS. M. Fix it whenever you please, Nelly. I'm not going to stand in your way. If the worst comes to the worst I can go into the workhouse.

BON. Oh, be damned to the workhouse! (*He rises*.)

NELLY. Bob!

BON (*angry*). What sense is there in talking about the workhouse when you've nearly three pounds a week coming in, as well as the house. Why, you can afford to pay a companion to come and look after you.

(*He walks up and down.*)

MRS. M. Very well. Nelly's quite at liberty to do whatever she fancies, if she can endure the thought of turning me off to die under the hands of a stranger.

BON. But, you know, it's a bit thick, it is really. Nelly can't go on taking care of you to the end of her life. It's not fair to her—and it's not fair to me, either.

MRS. M. Ah! So it's yourself you're thinking of all the time, Bob Painter.

BON (*angrily*). Well, it's only natural for a fellow to want to get married. I tell you I'm sick of waiting, and I'm not going to wait much longer.

MRS. M. (*exasperated*). Then you'd better ask Gladys Carpenter to marry you.

BON. Eh? (*He stops in surprise.*)

MRS. M. Yes. You may well look like that. You took her to the Hippodrome, and you can't deny it, try as you may.

NELLY. Mother!

MRS. M. Don't mother me in that tone of voice. I know a mother's duty——

NELLY. Mother, *please!* I can trust Bob. I don't believe he *did* take Gladys Carpenter to the Hippodrome.

MRS. M. What! When Mrs. Willett's Sarah saw him, and told Mrs. Willett, and Mrs. Willett told me!

NELLY. It wasn't Bob, it was some one else. Wasn't it, Bob?

BON (*quite simply*). No, it was me all right, Nelly.

(*A pause.*)

I asked you first, you know, Nelly. You remember ; Saturday night.

NELLY. Of course. Mother wasn't well, and I couldn't go.

BOB. I didn't like to waste the tickets, so I—I asked Gladys. I've known her a long time.

NELLY. But you might have told me about it.

BOB. Haven't been here since Saturday.

NELLY. No, of course not. (*A slight pause*). I don't mind, Bob. It would have been a shame to waste the tickets.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN snorts.)

MRS. M. You'd better take Gladys Carpenter to the Gaiety to-night.

(*A pause*.)

NELLY. Would you like to, Bob ?

BOB. What ?

NELLY. Take Gladys to the Gaiety ?

BOB. I dare say she'd go if I asked her.

NELLY. Then do.

BOB. Don't you mind ?

NELLY. Not a bit.

BOB. You see, it's rotten for a chap to go alone, and—and—it would be a shame—

MRS. M. To waste the tickets.

(*A pause*.)

(BOB looks at his watch.)

BOB. Well, I'd better be getting along.

NELLY. You'll miss the curtain raiser, won't you ?

BOB. Shant miss much, I dare say. Good night,

Mrs. Mountain. Sorry I got my hair off just now.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN doesn't reply.)

BOB (*at the door*). I'd just like a word with you, Nelly.

(BOB goes out, and NELLY follows him.)

(As soon as the door is closed MRS. MOUNTAIN sits up briskly, and looks towards the door, but it is closed and she can hear nothing. Accordingly with a grunt of annoyance she thumps the cushions and lies down in her former position. Very soon NELLY comes in.)

MRS. M. What was it he wanted to say to you?

NELLY. He says I've got to let him know tomorrow for certain whether we can be married on June 21.

MRS. M. Well, of course, Nelly, you must be guided by your own feelings. You mustn't think of me. I don't suppose I shall be here to trouble you much longer.

(NELLY walks to the fireplace without replying.)

Of course, he's fond of Gladys Carpenter, there's no doubt about that.

NELLY (*pettishly*). I don't want to hear any more about Gladys Carpenter, mother.

(The front door bell rings.)

MRS. M. Good gracious. He's not come back, surely?

NELLY. I don't think so. (She goes to the window and peeps through the blind). It looks rather like Mr. Shoosmith.

MRS. M. (with animation). Mr. Shoosmith!

(NELLY goes out. MRS. MOUNTAIN jumps up very, very quickly, whips the shawl from her shoulders like lightning, rolls it up and pushes it under the sofa. Then she examines herself in the mantel glass, touches her hair, takes off her eyeglasses and smiles at herself. She rearranges the cushions and again takes her place on the sofa, but this time she sits up rather than lies down. NELLY returns with MR. SHOOSMITH, a stout, rather coarse, downright healthy man of 55.)

MR. SHOOSMITH (*breezily*). Good evening, Mrs. Mountain. (*He rubs his hands*). Nippy outside to-night. And how's yourself?

MRS. M. (*brightly*). Much as usual, Mr. Shoosmith.

MR. S. You look like a blooming rose, upon my word.

MRS. M. Take the arm-chair, Mr. Shoosmith

MR. S. (*politely*). Ladies first.

(*He indicates the arm-chair to Nelly.*)

NELLY. Oh, I'm not stopping. I've got to write a note.

MR. S. Then that's all right. (*He sits in the arm-chair*). And where's the faithful Bob to-night?

NELLY. I'm surprised you didn't meet him. He's gone to the theatre.

MR. S. And why hasn't he taken you?

NELLY. Oh, I couldn't leave mother.

MR. S. Now what a pity I wasn't a few minutes earlier. I could have kept your mother company.

(*He smiles at Mrs. Mountain, who smiles cheerfully back at him.*)

NELLY. You wouldn't have been much use. It's a nurse that mother wants.

MR. S. } (*together*) { A nurse!

MRS. M. } (*together*) { Nelly, don't be silly.

NELLY. I wish you could persuade her to see Dr. Hodgkinson, Mr. Shoosmith. I'm always asking her to let me call him in, but she pretends there's nothing the matter with her.

MR. S. (*adjusting a pair of spectacles*). But, God bless my soul, she's the picture of health. Look at her colour!

NELLY. That's one of the worst symptoms she could possibly have. And you see, nobody will believe there's anything wrong with her while she looks so bright and rosy. Even Bob doesn't know how ill

she is. She's so brave she tries to hide it from people, but she can't hide it from me.

MR. S. But what's the matter with her?

MRS. M. (*pettishly*). There's nothing at all the matter with me. I wish you'd be quiet, Nelly.

NELLY. How *can* you talk like that, mother? Do you know, Mr. Shoosmith, that I have to help her upstairs every night, and she has to have her breakfast in bed every morning. She's not fit to get up for it. Whenever she tries to do a bit of housework she gets knocked up directly and has to give in. In fact, she's been so weak just lately that she couldn't do anything but lie on that sofa and read.

MR. S. She always seems chirpy enough when I'm here of an evening.

NELLY. Yes, she brightens up wonderfully whenever anybody calls. I wish you'd look in oftener.

(NELLY turns and goes to the door.)

MRS. M. You'll mind the kitchen fire doesn't go out, Nelly, won't you?

NELLY. I'll have a look at it.

(NELLY goes out.)

MR. S. Well, Mrs. Mountain, I'm downright sorry to hear you're not so well. It's bad news to take away with me.

(He rises and stands with his back to the fire.)

MRS. M. Are you going away again? You are a busy man. How long are you going for, this time?

MR. S. For good.

MRS. M. For good?

MR. S. Ay.

MRS. M. Do you mean you're leaving Manchester?

MR. S. I do. I've come here to-night to say good-bye. You see, the other day the manager of our Liverpool shop went and popped it.

MRS. M. Popped it?

MR. S. (*pointing to the ceiling*). Slipped his cable — went to glory.

MRS. M. Oh, you mean he died.

MR. S. That's it; only I believe in putting these things delicately. Well, they've given me the job. I start to-morrow morning.

MRS. M. Well, Mr. Shoosmith, this *is* a blow.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN *is concerned but not at all affected*.)

MR. S. It's a bit of a staggerer. I shall miss you, Mrs. Mountain.

MRS. M. It's very nice of you to say so.

MR. S. It's been very pleasant for a lonely widower living in "digs," to drop in and enjoy a little female society now and then.

MRS. M. We've always been glad to see you.

MR. S. Thank you. Thank you. (*A pause*. He looks at his watch). Well, Mrs. Mountain, I'm afraid it's good-bye.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN stands up and offers her hand.

MR. SHOOSMITH takes it, and then changes his mind.)

MR. S. Just sit down again for a minute, will you. I think I'd better tell you. We're not boy and girl, you know. We're both on the wrong side of fifty, I take it.

MRS. M. Oh, Mr. Shoosmith!

MR. S. Well, I am. Aren't *you*?

MRS. M. (*hesitating*). Just.

MR. S. Of course. I knew. Nelly's getting on for thirty.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN sits down again on the sofa.)

MR. S. Well, as I say, we're old enough to talk plainly. I don't mind telling you that I came here to-night on purpose to ask you to marry me.

MRS. M. Mr. Shoosmith! (*She is genuinely surprised*).

MR. S. I even took the liberty of bringing a ring with me. (*He produces it.*) See? It belonged to the late Mrs. Shoosmith. (*He puts the ring back in his pocket.*)

MRS. M. But—don't put it back, Mr. Shoosmith.

MR. S. Why not?

MRS. M. I've not refused you.

MR. S. I've not asked you, Mrs. Mountain.

MRS. M. I—I thought you did.

MR. S. No. You don't catch me marrying a confirmed invalid.

MRS. M. But I'm not a confirmed invalid.

MR. S. If half of what Nelly said was true I guess you're confirmed enough to settle my hash. I *should* be a fool to start at this new place with a wife who couldn't do any housework, and had to have her breakfast in bed every morning.

MRS. M. You're very cruel, Mr. Shoosmith. (*She begins to sob gently.*) I think you might have kept your mouth shut and gone away without telling me all this.

MR. S. (*concerned*). I'm sorry. I thought you'd like to know. I thought you'd take it as a compliment.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN *sobs and rings her handbell.*)

MR. S. Upon my soul, I can't understand it properly even yet. I always thought what a fine healthy woman you were. I tell you straight, I nearly got let in; I did indeed.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN *rings the bell.*)

MR. S. Do you want anything?

MRS. M. I want Nelly to show you out.

MR. S. (*taken aback*). Oh, all right. I can take a hint. (*She sobs.*) I say I can take a hint. But you can't blame me for not marrying a confirmed invalid. I've had some. My first wife was a confirmed invalid.

(NELLY comes in with a letter in her hand.)

NELLY. Were you ringing?

MRS. M. Mr. Shoosmith is going, Nelly.

NELLY. Oh, would you mind posting this letter in the pillarbox for me, Mr. Shoosmith?

MR. S. Pleasure. (*He takes the letter and turns to Mrs. Mountain and half offers his hand*). Good-bye again, Mrs. Mountain.

MRS. M. (*ignoring his hand*). Good-bye, Mr. Shoosmith.

(MR. SHOOSMITH and NELLY go out. MRS. MOUNTAIN rubs her eyes and cheeks with her handkerchief. NELLY returns.)

MRS. M. (*faintly*). I think I'll have my gruel now, Nelly.

NELLY. Is your head bad again?

MRS. M. Yes. (*She leans back on her cushions and closes her eyes*.)

NELLY. Why, you've dropped your shawl.

(NELLY picks up the shawl from under the sofa and arranges it round MRS. MOUNTAIN's shoulders. She goes towards the door and then stops.)

NELLY. By the way, I've written to Bob.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN just opens her eyes.)

I told him I can't fix any date at present; and—and if he can't wait any longer he'd better break off the engagement.

(MRS. MOUNTAIN stares at her.)

You see, it wasn't—it wasn't fair to Bob.

(NELLY seems as if she is going to continue, but she

doesn't say anything after all ; and after standing still a moment turns quickly and goes straight out of the room. MRS. MOUNTAIN reaches for her novel and with a sigh of content settles down to it.)

(CURTAIN.)

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